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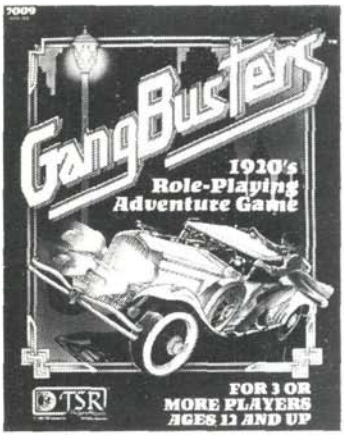

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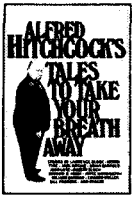

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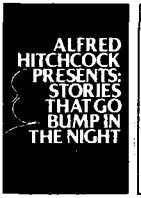

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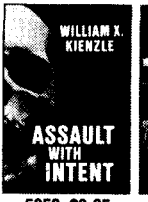

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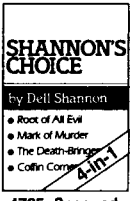

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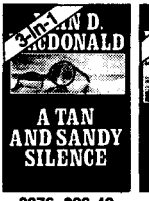

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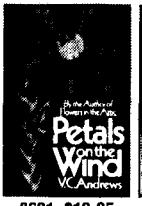

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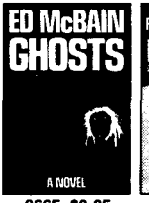

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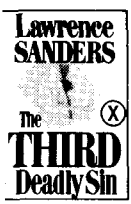

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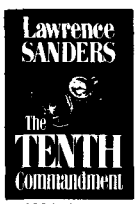

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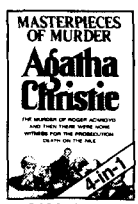

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a *NEW* short story by

STANLEY ELLIN

The publication of Stanley Ellin's latest story has always been a special event for the editors and readers of EQMM . . .

In a review of THE SPECIALTY OF THE HOUSE AND OTHER STORIES: *The Complete Mystery Tales, 1948–1978, Thomas M. Disch wrote in* Book World*: "Ellin's stories succeed or fail, it would seem to me, in proportion as the wisdom they embody is large-spirited, clear-headed, and focused on issues of urgent and elemental importance, and in proportion as they fulfill their appointed esthetic tasks of wit, concision, and mortise-to-tenon inevitability. On the latter score Ellin is rarely to be faulted, and on the former his ratio of hits to misses is very high indeed." Of the following story, we unhesitatingly assure you Mr. Ellin is not to be faulted—it is a solid hit by the Grand Master Mr. Disch also described as "the best living practitioner of the well made tale and a worthy successor to De Maupassant."*

More exciting news for Ellin fans is the recent publication, also by The Mysterious Press, of his latest novel, The Dark Fantastic . . .

GRAFFITI

by STANLEY ELLIN

Up to that exchange with Veszto in the Faculty Club dining room, Halas had never really given much thought to the subject of graffiti. After all, these testimonials to marker-pens and spray-can paints smeared over walls, monuments, buses, subway cars—especially those subway cars—were a fact of life in New York City. A bit of an eyesore perhaps, but one easily outweighed by all

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the glories of this spectacular city itself. Halas, who knew a good many of the world's cities at first hand, adored New York City.

Of course, to give Veszto his due in that heated exchange at lunch, the man obviously could not help having been born a cheapskate, *ein Geizhals*, *un avare*—observe there the root of "avaricious"—so the knowledge that those graffiti recently applied to the hood of his almost brand-new Buick could only be erased at great expense had to strike him through the heart like a javelin. And, of course, by some regrettable genetic twist, he was one of your darkly brooding Hungarians with no capacity to take life's little jokes with a touch of humor, no *joie de vivre* in him at all. In spirit at least, thought Halas, who overflowed with *joie de vivre*, the man was hardly what you could even call a Hungarian.

And getting down to the nitty-gritty, Veszto was afflicted with a consuming envy. Granted that he was a brilliant physicist, a consultant in the national space program, a full professor at the university which, as it added more and more to its vast properties around Washington Square, was also moved to lure to its roster such shining stars as this Doctor Bela Veszto.

But, as sourpuss Veszto was well aware, where he was a star in this firmament Janos Halas was undeniably a superstar. Janos Halas himself, that mesmerizing savant, lecturer, author, that master of comparative philology, who almost singlehanded had overturned clumsy Nineteenth Century German scholarship in philology and had come up with the common basis of all human language. The Halas Linguistics, no less.

No mere professor either, but Distinguished Professor of Linguistics, with a secretary and an office for life.

Oh, yes. Enter any academic gathering in the world, never mind how prestigious its attenders, and observe that when Doctor Janos Halas was announced he was the one they all craned their heads to see, the one they all murmured over in awe. A pet of *The New York Times* itself, judging from the amount of print it now and again bestowed on him.

An especially bitter pill for that viperish cheapskate Veszto to swallow every time it happened. Viperish in his insults, calculatingly cheap in the way he had wrathfully stalked out of the dining room overlooking his bill for lunch—what a convenient oversight—thus sticking Halas with the bill.

"Sick with envy," Halas told his wise and wonderful Klara that evening, recounting the tale of the stormy lunch. "But this time he

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was at his absolute worst. Do you know what he had the temerity to say to my face?"

"What?" asked Klara, who, after thirty years of marriage to her adored Janos, was well rehearsed in her lines.

"That my opinion on any subject is irrelevant, because I am not a scientist but a fantasist. Because linguistics is not a science but only a stewpot of unverifiable theories."

"And then?"

"And then I pointed out to him that my flawless mastery of two dozen languages certainly suggested more than a talent for cooking up unverifiable theories and he said yes, it did suggest I might do very well teaching at Berlitz."

"And all this because of the graffiti?" said Klara.

"Because I didn't sympathize with him in his agony over that miserable automobile. You should have heard him carry on about the horrors of this city. Obviously, it is an abomination operated only for the benefit of *Lumpenproletariat* who go around marking up people's Buicks. So much for the most magnificent metropolis ever conceived by flawed humanity. In my judgment, a real worm's-eye view of it."

"And naturally you presented this judgment to him."

"Naturally."

Klara sighed. "Janos, why do you sit with him at lunch? There are other tables in that dining room, aren't there?"

"Why?" said Halas. "But, darling, Bela Veszto is my oldest friend. You know we played together in the streets of Budapest as children. That he was my schoolmate in the university at Prague. And if he's envious of me to the point of sometimes being insulting—"

"Yes?"

"Well, I can't be small-minded. I understand his feelings, and I forgive him for them."

No need to mention then and there that Veszto would have to suffer a little for venting those feelings so nastily. Would have to be stirred up a little by some mischievous baiting before the sun had set again.

So Halas was in a benignly mischievous mood when he left the house next morning to walk the mile downtown to the university. The October weather was crisp and clear; nowhere in the world was there more satisfying, more inspiring weather than this marvelous city offered during autumn. And the street itself made a pleasant prospect, a tree-shaded street in the East Thirties—the Murray Hill

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section—with facing rows of handsome old brownstones and graystones. The Halas residence was a four-storied graystone, one of the perquisites the grateful university, its owner, had provided at a nominal rental, and it offered all that could be desired for civilized living.

Which, come to think of it, was something that dried-up Veszto refused to appreciate. The joy of strolling among the endless variety of humanity in these streets. Of savoring the theaters, the concert halls, the museums and galleries, the exotic restaurants laid on in such profusion for the truly civilized. All wasted on a Veszto who fled the city in panic at every opportunity to take solitary refuge in his rustic hideout in Connecticut where he could sit and watch the grass grow. A scientist? A monk who had found the wrong vocation, that's what he was.

Well, that misplaced monk would have an interesting time of it at lunch today.

Graffiti, of all things. How the devil could anyone get so emotional about it?

Halas, about to cross the street, stopped short. Then he changed course and headed for the subway station on Park Avenue.

He let a couple of trains go by while he strolled the length of the platform studying the marker-pen and spray-can work adorning its walls. He missed another, so caught up was he by his examination of its gaudily spray-painted exterior as it unloaded and loaded passengers. Interesting. Really interesting. As any subject was when one put his mind to it. And the interior of the car he finally did enter was most rewarding of all, its walls, ceilings, even windows so thick with glossy black, illegible marker-pen messages that it made for an almost dizzying effect.

Dizzying. And inspiring.

In his office, at ease behind his desk, Halas considered how best to apply this inspiration to the forthcoming lunch. Across the room, Mrs. Gerard, his appointed secretary, attended to his mail, which arrived each morning by the bushel. It was her job to answer whatever of it she could and to then deliver the remainder to Klara who, in her study next to his on the third floor of the graystone, not only dealt with it, but copyread his manuscripts, saw to his accounts, arranged his travel itineraries, and kept house, contracting for whatever help was needed. The perfect wife. Not that she would altogether approve the entertainment he planned for Veszto. She had this unfortunate instinct for peacemaking. And if, God forbid, that

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instinct ever became prevalent among mankind, what a dreary world this would be.

At lunchtime, Halas delayed his arrival in the dining room so that Veszto would already be at the table and in no position to avoid unwanted company. Sure enough, there was Veszto well into his bargain-basement entrée—he always ordered the lowest-priced item on the menu—and, happy sight, there was Weissenfels of the psychology department deep in conversation with him. For all his many honors, Weissenfels remained *echt* Viennese, a roly-poly little man with deceptively innocent eyes behind those thick glasses and with a fondness for a good joke. His presence here and now, Halas felt, could only have been provided by a kindly and approving heaven.

Weissenfels greeted Halas warmly. Veszto looked for an instant as if he were ready to pack it in on the spot, but most likely because this would mean a waste of good money he decided to remain where he was, finishing his meal in stony silence. Weissenfels took all this in at a glance and, without actually doing so, gave the impression that he was settling back to enjoy whatever was forthcoming. Unlike dear Klara, Weissenfels had no unhealthy peacemaking instinct.

Halas concentrated on his menu, ordered luxuriously, then turned to Weissenfels. "My old friend Bela and I had a little contretemps yesterday. You see, his car—"

"Yes," said Weissenfels. "He was telling me about the car. And the contretemps."

"Then will you kindly inform him now that I regret the episode? That I apologize for what I had to say and the way I said it?"

Weissenfels looked disappointed that the curtain was apparently coming down before the action on stage had even warmed up. He said to Veszto, "You heard that, of course?"

"Heard it," said Veszto coldly, "and don't believe a word of it."

"In that case," Halas told him, "I withdraw the apology."

Veszto's lip curled. "That's more like it."

"At the same time, Bela," Halas said with intense sincerity, "get it into that thick head that I am truly grateful to you. Yesterday, without intending to, you led me to an absolute revelation. One of the most amazing insights into linguistics that anyone has ever known. And no matter what you think of it, linguistics does happen to be my discipline, my life's work, my *raison d'être.*"

Veszto frowned. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"What do you think?" Halas said impatiently. "Graffiti, my friend. Graffiti. The subject you got into such a sweat about yesterday."

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"Ah, yes. Your favorite art form."

"Art? Art has nothing to do with it, Bela. Those spray-can decorations I've been examining are an offense to the eye."

Veszto raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I acknowledge it. Idiot swoops and swirls in the most atrocious colors. Infantile, electronic-age Art Nouveau. Pathetic."

Weissenfels regarded Halas with honest curiosity. "You mean you've been studying graffiti? Seriously?"

Halas turned to him and gave him a broad and meaningful wink. "Very seriously, Doctor. Last evening and this morning. In subway cars."

Weissenfels caught on at once. He managed to conceal a smile. "That's the place for it," he said.

"It is. And let us dismiss that spray-can foolishness. Forget it. But"—Halas held up a commanding forefinger—"in the marker-pen script we have a different story. A most meaningful and exciting one."

Weissenfels, definitely sent by heaven, put on an expression of intense interest. Veszto glowered.

"Script?" he snarled. "You call those scrawls by some slobbering vandal a script?"

"Yes, Bela. And the marvelous discovery I made by close examination—the discovery I owe to you—is that this script appears to be the simulation of a written language. Try to read it, and you find you can't. Those dashing loops and lines seem meaningless."

Veszto snorted. "And have you considered," he demanded scathingly, "that this is because they are the hopeless efforts of illiterates to shape letters they can vaguely recognize but cannot duplicate?"

"That was my original hypothesis, Bela. It doesn't hold water."

"Nonsense."

"Bela," Halas said in a tone of stern reproof, "keep in mind that you're in my province now. My department. I don't give you lessons in physics. Please do not give me lessons in linguistics."

"I see. And graffiti is now in that department?"

"It well may be. Now try to keep an open mind while I explain." Halas pressed his hand to his chest. "Will you do me that small favor?"

Veszto shrugged broadly. "Sure. Go right ahead, maestro. Consider my mind wide open." He returned to the chicken leg on his plate, carefully prying off the last bits of meat from it with his knife.

Halas leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Very well, now listen

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carefully. Those apparently meaningless scrawls are not meaningless. I traveled a considerable distance back and forth examining samples of them closely. It suddenly struck me, Bela—a veritable thunderclap—that I was looking at a fine and flowing calligraphy, highly sophisticated, with breaks and rhythms indicating that what we had here was an authentic language."

Veszto's fork, on its way to his mouth, remained poised in the air. "A language? What language?"

The waitress brought Halas his soup and Weissenfels his coffee. Halas dipped into the soup, grateful for the chance to recharge imagination. A fantasist, was he? All right, Bela, let's see just how good a fantasist. He shook his head at Veszto. "At this point, my dear Bela, a language unknown to me. Incomprehensible to me."

"Oh? Well, in that case, my dear Janos—"

"No, no. Think, Bela, think. No matter how incomprehensible a script may be to you—Chinese, Arabic, Cyrillic, whatever—when you see it you know it represents a language, don't you?"

"Well—"

"For that matter, if you, as a superb physicist, are faced by some mathematical formula which uses totally unfamiliar symbols, you would still know at once that this is a mathematical formula. Admit it."

"Well, yes," Veszto said unwillingly, "but—" and then seemed lost in troubled thought. Ready to sound the retreat, Halas surmised. Beautiful. The danger now was that Weissenfels, his round face unnaturally scarlet, was obviously struggling against open laughter. Halas narrowed his eyes at him warningly and returned to the shaken Veszto.

"Those graffiti are a language, Bela. In fact, tomorrow I am taking my camera into the subway—"

"Wait, Janos. A language? A sophisticated calligraphy? Produced by juvenile delinquents?"

"Of course not. I told you to forget that element with their spray-cans of disgusting colors. I am talking about a different element entirely. One capable of writing those lines of script. Of communicating with each other through those lines." He shrugged regretfully. "One would like to think that those are passages of magnificent poetry, but that would be, well, an indulgence in fantasy. No, I must accept the cold reality that those are probably messages."

"Messages," Veszto echoed.

"Yes, Bela. And unpleasant messages at that. You know how often

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you've catalogued for me the disasters that afflict this city. Those wildfires devastating whole blocks. Floodwaters suddenly erupting from broken pipes under the pavements. Cornices of buildings suddenly tumbling on people's heads. God knows how many other calamities each day. And my response to you, my dismissal of all this, was wrong, Bela. Unjust. Unscientific. Because the evidence now in hand convinces me that these endless disasters are no accidents."

"The evidence." Veszto squinted at Halas's solemn face. "Those lines of graffiti?"

"Exactly. Messages, plans, instructions exchanged by an invisible force among us conspiring to destroy this city by first destroying its population's morale. Agents of some galactic power out there whose designated prey we are. You see, Bela—"

Weissenfels could contain himself no longer. He sputtered helplessly, choking with laughter, pounding a fist on the table. Veszto gaped at him, then suddenly released from the spell, he glared at Halas. "Buffoon!"

"Now, Bela—"

"*Szamár!*" snarled Veszto, his face drained of all color. "*Disznó!*"

He stood up so violently that his chair almost went over backwards. Every face in the dining room turned his way as he plunged through the door. Then, as Halas glanced around, eyebrows raised, all faces politely turned away. And, Halas saw, there on the table was Veszto's lunch bill. So he had gotten away with it again, bad temper evidently becoming a profitable way of life. Halas picked up the bill, but Weissenfels, now under fair control, plucked it from his hand.

"No, I insist," Weissenfels said. He wiped the tears of mirth from his eyes. "I owe you this much at least for the entertainment. But you know, of course, that you really are a monster."

"Am I? Well, answer this question, Doctor. Did our friend ever inform you that your discipline—the field of psychology—was nonsense? That you yourself were no scientist at all but a spinner of fantastic and unprovable theories?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. But since he also charged Freud, Jung, and Adler with the same sin, I couldn't be too offended."

"Very generous of you."

"And very politic. After all, I work with him on the Faculty Coordinating Committee, and he could make life there difficult. Which," said Weissenfels, "reminds me that the committee meets tomorrow morning. I have a feeling a little soothing syrup in advance

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is prescribed. Too bad. I'd love to tell this story around, but he'd be let to know at once who it came from." Weissenfels shook his head in wonder. "Oh, Lord. Invisible invaders from outer space. Astral linguistics. And the way he sat there with his mouth open—"

"Being spoonfed the fantasy he so detests—"

"Yes, indeed. Of course," said Weissenfels, straight-faced, "I can only hope it is fantasy, Doctor. Otherwise, you must realize the dreadful danger you're in. I mean, once those invaders know you're onto their precious secret—"

"And shared it with you and our humorless colleague—"

"True. That makes three of us. Well, I suppose all we can do is bear up bravely under the strain."

"I'm sure we'll manage to," said Halas.

That evening, despite a powerful temptation to do so, he refrained from telling dear Klara about his triumph. He had the feeling that this time—especially since an outsider had witnessed the scene—he might have gone a bit too far in his teasing, and if he had that feeling Klara would have it even more acutely. She, angelic but deluded creature, somehow managed to find Bela Veszto pathetic. So next thing—it had happened before—there might be a surprise dinner party announced, a large and extravagant peacemaking dinner party, at which Doctor Bela Veszto would turn up as one of the guests and would sit there stuffing himself with expensive viands and treating his host, who had paid for them, with icy indifference.

And yet, what good friend had advised Veszto not to park that car on the streets overnight but to rent space in a garage, never mind the expense? Naturally, none other than the foresighted Janos Halas.

And how had Veszto responded to this wisdom? "But how generous you are with other people's money, aren't you, Halas?"

The devil with him. This time there would be no peacemaking dinner party, because Klara was not going to be given any reason for one.

Case closed.

So when Klara, with unclouded brow and affectionate good humor, woke him next morning he felt distinctly pleased with himself that he had not confided in her, had exercised an almost noble self-restraint. And, thought Halas, since there's no sense depending on virtue to be its own reward, he'd make sure of that reward tonight by taking himself and Klara to a supremely good restaurant for dinner and then to a show. Something frivolous.

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Altogether a promising day. The weather was again crisp and clear, the seminar scheduled for the afternoon would bring around the table a dozen of his most fervent acolytes—including two of the prettiest graduate students in the university—and then would come that gormandizing dinner and a lighthearted entertainment. Altogether promising.

Until, after bidding dear Klara a loving farewell, he stepped through the outside door of the house and closed it behind him.

Graffiti.

Disgusting glossy black scrawls made by marker-pen fouling the stone wall beside the door. Several feet of that hitherto pristine gray wall—a lovely soft-toned Wedgwood gray—defaced by those loops and lines and cross-strokes. Halas backed up to get the whole view, and indeed the further he backed up, the more horrid the view. He took notice that people walking by glanced at it with distaste. An aristocratic-looking woman with a small aristocratic-looking dog on a leash slowed down to shake her head at the sight. It was that kind of block, after all.

Halas looked up and down the street. As far as he could see, it was still that kind of block, no trace of any such vandalism marring any other building in sight. Only this one. As if the home of Doctor Janos Halas had been singled out for desecration by some drooling delinquent.

Singled out?

But, of course, thought Halas, stunned by sudden enlightenment. And if he had gone a little too far in his teasing of Veszto, well, dear Bela had gone the whole distance in this vindictive and sophomoric response. On the other hand, it did make a comic picture: a man of Veszto's years and academic stature prowling around in the dark hours to filthy this wall. And probably foaming at the mouth with rage as he did so.

And the sweetest revenge now, Halas told himself, would be to react as Veszto would never expect him to. Overlook all this. Be blind to it. The wall should be promptly cleaned—it was just a matter of phoning Mrs. Gerard, the faithful secretary, to have the university put a maintenance man on it—and then, when meeting Veszto, to wear a bland and untroubled face. Make no complaint, no accusation, don't mention this business at all, it never happened. While all Veszto could do was grind his teeth in frustration.

Dear Bela. Some people never learned not to play games with really clever opponents.

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Halas walked back into the house, and from high above Klara called, "Janos? Did you forget something?"

"Just a phone call, darling."

Not bothering to take off hat or coat, Halas used the phone in the hallway near the foot of the staircase. Mrs. Gerard, who was rarely made breathless by anything, answered his greeting breathlessly.

"Yes, Doctor. I was expecting you'd call as soon as you heard. Isn't it awful? I was just talking to Doctor Weissenfels's assistant, and he practically—"

"Mrs. Gerard!"

"Yes, Doctor?"

"What the devil is this all about?"

"Then you don't know? Oh, it's awful. It seems that last night Doctor Weissenfels got together with Doctor Veszto for a drink at some café near where Doctor Veszto lives. I mean, lived."

"Lived?"

"Yes. Because there was this terrible explosion—the police think it was a gas leak in the kitchen there—and they were both killed. Some other people were hurt, but they were killed. Both of them."

"Veszto and Weissenfels are dead?"

"Isn't it horrible? It was on the television news this morning. And Doctor Weissenfels's assistant was just telling me all—Doctor? Are you there, Doctor Halas?"

Halas put down the phone. His heart was hammering furiously, a cold sweat was enveloping him. So it wasn't poor Bela coming around to do mischief in the dark. How stupid, how unkind, to even suspect it might have been.

But Bela had been at that lunch table yesterday. And Weissenfels. How Weissenfels had laughed. How quickly both of them had been wiped out just like that. And Janos Halas, the third one at that table? Given a few hours dispensation? Thank God at least that he hadn't repeated to Klara one word of the story he had told at the table. Otherwise, she could walk out of the house on her way to do her shopping and suddenly—

What is this, Halas asked himself in astonishment. He pulled out his handkerchief and mopped his dripping forehead. Grotesque, the direction his thoughts were taking. Next thing he'd be reporting flying saucers to the police. All because of a thundering coincidence.

So he had told that story to Bela and Weissenfels. So, poor souls, they had suddenly died in an accident, the kind that could happen to anyone. A coincidence.

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To believe for even one instant that invisible and malevolent beings were closing in because he had given their secret away was ridiculous.

But those fresh graffiti marking that wall outside?

"A coincidence!" Halas cried out, and when Klara called down, "What is it, dear?" he shouted back angrily, "It's nothing! Nothing at all! Absolutely nothing!"

Passionately shouting it out, he knew, like an exorcism.

DETECTIVERSE

NEATNESS COUNTS

by ROSEMARIE MALLORY

"M'lady, I fear it's the Master,
"He's dead and it's quite a disaster."
"Good heavens," she cried,
The gory scene she espied,
"We really will have to replaster."

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a *NEW* Main Street story by

HENRY T. PARRY

For Doc, punching number thirteen every Friday morning was like somebody else being careful not to step on the cracks on the sidewalk. Obsessive, Charley McCall called it . . .

THE PUNCHBOARDS

by HENRY T. PARRY

I was writing a novel that summer about how this kid who was my age, thirteen, went out West to punch cattle for his uncle. It was all about the battles he and his uncle and his uncle's cowboys fought with this band of rustlers. Finally there is a big shootout and my hero finds himself in the middle of the street facing a rustler named Bad Sam Sears who is the fastest draw in the West. Bad Sam is standing there, holding his hands just above his two big guns, and sneering at my hero who's standing there too, all alone, with nothing to hold his hands over.

I was walking back from my paper route one morning trying to figure out how to get him out of this when I saw a Ford roadster go tearing up North Main with Tommy Foulkes, our Chief of Police, and Johnny Herring, another policeman, in it. I ran up the street after them, figuring something big must have happened to get both of them out together.

They turned off on the road that led to the ball field. When I got there I saw that the Chief had left the car just behind home plate—our ball field didn't have any fences and in the spring the outfield was sometimes used to pasture cows. He was busy underneath the bleachers, which I should explain was just a fancy name for four long homemade benches set back one above the other and shaded by a strip of canvas.

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The Chief, Johnny Herring, and Doc Stoneman, were bent over the body of a girl. Standing behind and looking even more green than usual was Two-Dip Dorsey, who ran the Kandy Kitchen in town. Two-Dip was a pretty big fellow but now he looked scared.

"I was taking a short-cut over to North Main on my way to open the store," Two-Dip said to me, "when I seen something white laying there. When I go closer I see it's her. So I ran back home and called Doc Stoneman and Tommy Foulkes. But it ain't no use. She's dead."

"Who?"

"Helen Handey. One of that Handey tribe lives out on the Ridge Road."

There was this big family of Handeys, the kind of people where if you walked by their place on Sunday morning you'd see Mrs. Handey and the girls all dressed up and leaving to walk to church and Old Man Handey and the boys in bib overalls with their heads stuck under the hood of a car. Somehow it worked out that the girls were all good people and the boys were kind of shiftless and plain no good. So that if it had been one of the Handey boys who had been found under the bleachers with his head busted in everybody would have said I told you he wasn't coming to no good end.

"It was in the cards one of them Handey kids was going to have something like this happen," I heard Doc Stoneman say. "Looks like to me the girls ain't much better than the boys."

And what he was saying was what everybody else in town was saying, or anyway thinking, after a few days—like as if when someone is murdered it's somehow their fault. I heard them saying at Charley McCall's news store—Charley's the man I delivered papers for—that Helen Handey had put up a fight, judging from the way she was all scratched and bruised and the ground was all torn up. But I never heard that anybody agrees to be murdered so how can it be their fault?

Doc Stoneman wasn't a doctor, he was the druggist—but he hadn't filled a prescription in years, not since Miss Hattie Snyder finished pharmacy school and came to work for him. Mostly Doc—who was a big round man, kind of reddened and fleshy—would sit on a wire ice-cream-parlor chair under the two-bladed ceiling fan with his Panama hat on, figuring out the stock market. He took the Journal of Commerce that he always had to come into Charley's for because that paper didn't come in until the eight o'clock trolley from Weston while my papers came in on the six o'clock.

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Doc was a spiffy dresser. He was the first in our town to have shoes of two colors, and the first to wear those light striped summer suits—I think they're called seersucker—when nobody else in town would wear them because they looked like you were out on the street in your pajamas. In his lapel Doc always wore a tiny pin, less than a half inch. It was the kind of pin where the front part screws onto a back part through a button hole. It had three funny-looking letters on it. Eddie Heener, who jerks soda at Doc's, said it was a pledge pin for some fraternity at State that Doc had been asked to join when he went there for one term about a hundred years ago. "That ain't the real pin," Eddie explained, "but Doc's awful proud of it. It's just a sign you been asked to join. Doc puts it on whatever coat he's wearing. Them letters on it is Greek, Doc told me. When I asked Doc what they meant, he got mad and told me to get back to work. Doc only gets mad at me about five or six times a day."

Doc was a big eater too. Often when I happened to be in his pharmacy I heard him say: "Four o'clock, Eddie," and Eddie would peel a banana, split it lengthwise, and lay it on one of those long silver sundae dishes. On top of that he'd put three dips of ice cream—chocolate, vanilla, and tutti-frutti. He'd give that a few squirts of chocolate syrup, spread on some crushed pineapple, and put a layer of marshmallow over the whole pile. I like sundaes an awful lot but I don't think I could have eaten that even if I could have afforded it. Doc didn't have any trouble though. He'd tuck a paper napkin under his chin and start dipping away real slow, like he was trying to make it last. He was careful not to get any spots on his seersucker suit.

"Ain't a nicer man in town than Doc," Charley used to say, "so long as you don't ask him to do anything for anybody." But Charley was always saying things like that.

Besides playing the market, Doc did another thing I guess you could call gambling. That was taking a chance on one of Charley McCall's punchboards.

Every Friday morning about eight-thirty Doc would come into Charley's, put a dime down on the counter, and punch out number thirteen. Never any other number. If somebody had punched out number thirteen already, Doc would just wait until the next Friday. There weren't any numbers printed over the holes. Doc just punched out the first number in the second row, which was thirteen, because there were twelve numbers in a row.

A punchboard is made of hard, pressed paper a half inch thick and

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measuring about eight by eleven inches. It has about sixteen or twenty rows of holes, the holes plugged with rolled-up slips of paper, each slip with a number on it. You take something like a pencil or a skinny knitting needle, punch out a hole—the holes are covered front and back with paper pasted over them—and pull the rolled-up slip out from the back of the board. If the number on the slip matches a number printed on the top of the board, you win a prize. Most people didn't take the prizes they won, stuff that ran mostly to celluloid-backed brushes or Statues of Liberty made of metal so soft you expected it to melt. There were some better prizes too but most everybody sold them back to Charley to get the money. "Legitimate sales of merchandise," Charley called it.

For Doc, punching number thirteen every Friday morning was like somebody else being careful not to step on the cracks on the sidewalk. I heard Charley telling someone about it and he used a fancy word. Obsessive, Charley said. I knew it must have been a word that Charley had just heard of because he used it about six times in the next ten minutes.

Doc Stoneman may have thought it was Helen Handey's fault that she got murdered, but Tommy Foulkes didn't think so. He got the county detectives in and later the state police. But nobody ever found out anything except that Helen had left the house around seven-thirty in the evening and hadn't come back.

The Handeys said she'd been doing this about once a week since Christmas but she'd never say where she was going or if she was meeting anyone. *Sometimes* she said she was going down the road to meet her friend Tilly Smith, but she was all dressed up so it wasn't likely she was spending much time with Tilly.

The thing that's hard to explain is how anybody in our town could be doing something for eight months without everybody knowing it. It was pretty hard to change your mind without somebody asking how come. Anyway, a couple of weeks went by and nobody found out who had murdered poor Helen Handey—and it looked like nobody every would.

I was still fussing with my novel—couldn't figure out a way to keep Bad Sam Sears from killing the hero in the showdown—then I got the idea that maybe I should write a detective story instead. I thought I could make the story sound more real if I visited the scene of a crime. Well, the only crime we ever had in our town was the murder of Helen Handey, so I went out to the ball field and

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looked around under the bleachers where Two-Dip Dorsey had found the body. It made me feel scared to think about what had happened here just a few weeks ago, right where I was standing, right in the same air space I was taking up, where someone had fought hard to stay alive and had lost.

I'd heard Charley McCall say the police had gone over the ground with a rake and hadn't found anything. Now the ground was littered over with the same stuff you always see around a ball field—wrappers from candy bars, empty cigarette packs, Crackerjack boxes, bottle caps, and empty soft-drink bottles. The grass was flattened from trampling but there was some Queen Anne's lace and some skunk cabbage standing around the foot of one of the uprights. I figured the best way to search the place was to take away everything that was there because of people eating, drinking, and smoking while watching the game. So I picked up every bit of trash I could find and made a pile of it behind the bleachers. Then I looked carefully, down on my hands and knees, at every inch of ground.

I didn't find anything except the cap of a Moxie bottle pressed down into the ground. I pried it up and flicked it onto the trash pile. Then I saw stuck to it, under it, the pin with the Greek letters I'd seen a hundred times on Doc Stoneman's lapel. I pulled it loose and held it in my hand, just staring at it, scared of it because of what it stood for. What I had started doing just to help me in writing a story had ended up connecting me with a happening out of real life—a dark, frightening, murderous happening, nothing at all like the story that I had in my head.

I suppose I should have looked for more clues but I had to stop because a bunch of kids were coming across the outfield and would have made a lot of smart remarks about what I was doing crawling around under the bleachers. But mostly I wanted to get rid of that pin.

When I went into police headquarters, which was a fancy name for one room on the first floor rear of the town hall, I found Chief Foulkes and Johnny Herring bent over the checkerboard. At least Johnny was bent. The chief was reading the newspaper, waiting for Johnny to move. Tommy was a big white-haired man with blue eyes that looked like he was thinking of something else while you were talking to him. There were people in town who said that Tommy talked slow and moved slow and the only thing he did fast was to

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think. I told them how I came to be rooting around under the bleachers and I held out my hand with the pledge pin in it.

"Hey, that's Doc Stoneman's," Johnny said. "He's been wearing that little doohickey ever since I knew him."

Tommy proceeded to ask me a lot of questions but I couldn't tell him much more than I already had.

"Shows Tilly Smith was telling us the truth," Johnny said. "She said she hadn't seen Helen except in church since around Christmas when Helen said she might be getting married soon and she shouldn't tell anybody. So when Helen was going out and nobody knew where she was going, she was meeting Doc out at the ball field. They get into some kind of fracas, maybe about getting married, and Doc kills her. You know how quick he flies off the handle. Stands to reason, don't it?"

"Doc could have lost that pin while he was watching a ballgame."

"Tommy, you know as well as I do that Doc ain't never been to a game since he played for the high school. He ain't been more than five blocks from his store in twenty years."

Tommy gave a deep sigh and kept quiet. He kind of squeezed his mouth with his left hand and looked at me a long time. I kept hoping Johnny Herring would keep on talking but he didn't.

"We want that you should keep quiet about what you found," Tommy said to me after a bit. "That would help us a lot."

Folks said that when Tommy Foulkes talked to you, it didn't make any difference if you were a kid or if you were old—say, thirty—you got the feeling he expected you to agree with him, as if there had always been some understanding between him and you about how things were. Well, that's the way I felt, and for the next couple of days I went around with this secret busting inside me. I could imagine Tommy Foulkes having meetings with the county detectives and the state police, discussing what they should do with what I'd found and probably mentioning my name any number of times. And at least two guys on my street said they could hardly stand being around anybody as important as I seemed to think I was.

A couple of mornings later—a Friday—I'd come in from my paper route and and was hanging around Charley's sneaking a free read from the magazines when Charley asked me to watch the store, which he usually did about twice a week. This time Charley said he wanted to meet the trolley and have it out with Skooks Decker, the motorman, who Charley said was helping himself to a paper out of

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the bundle he brought up from Weston. I guess maybe Skooks was, because folks said Skooks had a habit of reading a newspaper while he was running the trolley.

This morning Doc Stoneman came in, plunked a dime down on the counter, and pointed at the punchboard. I rang up his dime and watched him punch out the thirteenth hole. He read the slip, tossed it on the floor, and walked out the door, not saying anything. I noticed he wasn't wearing that pin in his lapel. But if Tommy Foulkes or any of the other police had talked to him about Helen Handey it didn't seem to have bothered Doc none. To me, he seemed the same as he always had. Noticing the slip of punchboard paper he'd tossed on the floor, this great idea came to me about how I could find out if Doc really had anything to do with Helen Handey.

I hung around Charley's as much as I could so I could pick up the slips of paper people punched out of the punchboards and tossed away. Charley asked me if I was sick or something because he never once had seen me pick up one single, solitary, earthly thing from the floor before. I spent hours practicing printing real small on the slips I picked up.

When I had it down pretty good, I wrote out three messages on three slips. Charley generally had three punchboards in stock, so one day when I was alone in the store—Charley had gone over to the town hall to argue with Lon Adams about his tax assessment—I took a pin and carefully picked holes in the back of the punchboard around the edges of the thirteenth hole, leaving a little lid held by a hinge of uncut paper. I pushed the open ends of a hairpin into the hole, squeezed the ends together, pulled out the slips of paper, and replaced them with the slips I had written on. Then I stuck the lids back down. It's funny, people would notice right away if you tampered with the front of the board but it never occurs to anyone to turn the board over to see if the back has been messed with. And once you've punched out a hole, you naturally expect the paper covering that hole in the back of the board to be broken open. I put the boards back in the drawer in the order I wanted Charley to take them out.

The next Friday morning when Doc came in and put down his dime, I watched him pretty close. Charley handed him the first board I doctored. Doc punched out the paper, unrolled it and read it. He jerked his head up to see if anyone was watching, but Charley was reading the cash register and Doc hardly knew I was there. He gave his glasses a poke and went to the door to read the slip in a better

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light, then put the slip in his pocket instead of tossing it on the floor. When Charley said: "No luck, hunh, Doc?" Doc didn't answer, he just walked out. What I'd written on the slip was: *Hi, Doc. Helen.*

The second Friday was about the same except Charley had stepped out. I handed Doc the second board and he punched out the thirteenth hole. He unrolled the paper and smoothed it over and over as if he couldn't bring himself to read it. Finally he did, and his face went gray and broke out in sweat. He walked out of the store, his big stomach banging against the screen door because he hadn't pushed it open ahead of him. This message read: *How about it, Doc? Helen.*

I saw Doc twice in the next week, meeting him as he was coming into town on North Main Street as I was headed out with my papers. I asked him what he was doing up so early and he mumbled something about taking a walk because he couldn't sleep. He looked like he'd been sick and that seersucker suit on him looked like it should have been worn by a much larger man, even though Doc was pretty big.

On the third Friday Doc read the slip I'd planted and groped his way out of the store. "What's got into Doc?" Charley asked. "Seems like he's sleep-walking or something." What had got into Doc was the third message: *Tonight, Doc. Same place. Helen.*

That night as soon as it got dark I said something about going downtown for a soda. I went up North Main to the ball field and sat down on the top row of bleachers, right over the place where Two-Dip Dorsey had found the body of Helen Handey. It was a beautiful night, deep summer, with a full moon, an owl beginning to stir over in Harris's Woods, and the sound of water flowing over the wall of Keller's Dam.

The road off North Main Street ends right where center field begins. I saw a car without lights stop out there where people usually park when there's a game. In the moonlight I could see a man, a big man, coming slowly in from center field, across second base, and over the pitcher's mound to home plate, where he turned around and looked at the diamond as though he was seeing again the old games that had been played there back in the days when everybody was young and the town had been a friendly, easygoing place, maybe before something was done that now couldn't be undone. I don't know. Anyway, the man turned, came around the backstop, and went around and under the bleachers. A big fear wrenched at my

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stomach when the thought struck me that maybe he had a flashlight. I could hear him below me, not three feet away.

"Helen."

He said it as though he wanted to talk and at the same time didn't want to talk and so had settled on a whisper. I felt myself go cold and queer, because something had come into my mind from someplace deep in it that I didn't know was there, something that made me expect to hear someone answer him, someone I'd seen lying dead on the ground below where I was sitting.

"Helen! Forgive! Please! Forgive!"

I heard him make a long moaning noise as he turned away. He went back the way he came—home plate, pitcher's mound, second base, and center field. The car door slammed.

I took off straight for the town hall to tell Tommy Foulkes what I'd seen but police headquarters were dark and locked up. The next morning first thing I went back to headquarters and there wasn't anyone there.

I was heading to Charley's to pick up my papers when I saw Charley and about a dozen others from up the block staring into the windows of Doc's pharmacy. It was pretty early for that many people to be hanging around, so I went to see what was going on.

I looked in the window, and there was Doc seated in his wire chair under the two-bladed fan, dressed in his seersucker suit and wearing his Panama hat. Standing behind him was Doc Simmons, who was a medical doctor, and Tommy Foulkes. Miss Hattie Snyder, the pharmacist, was in there too, dabbing at her eyes with a paper napkin.

"Seems Hattie came in early to fix a prescription for old Miss Berger out on Second Street," Charley was saying. "She found Doc sitting there at the table with a napkin under his chin. He'd put together one of those big sundaes he had every day and had polished it off. Then, from what Hattie says, he must have fixed himself something from the pharmacy. They ain't sure yet. The coroner will have to find out."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

PATRICIA MOYES

Mr. Smith was Arabic and naturally refused anything alcoholic—in fact, he averted his eyes and gave the impression of muttering a prayer to Allah when the assassin poured a modest Scotch and soda. Considering the mission on which Mr. Smith had come, a drink or so wouldn't have added significantly to his list of sins on Judgment Day . . .

A LONELY PROFESSION

by PATRICIA MOYES

The profession of paid assassin—or "gun for hire," as the Americans put it with unnecessary melodrama—is really not very difficult nor arduous. The money is extremely good, so that a couple of jobs a year are usually enough to maintain a high standard of living. Of course, it's essential to be a crack shot, and I discovered I was so gifted during my brief spell in the Army, where I won several prizes for marksmanship. I didn't enjoy the Army, I must say, and I resigned as soon as I could. But there remained the question of making a living, and my only real asset seemed to be my expertise with firearms.

What makes a professional killer's life much less dangerous than many people believe is the fact that it is extremely difficult for the police to trace a murderer who has absolutely no known connection with the victim. Once you have eliminated family members, business rivals, jealous lovers, and so on, you are left with the world's population as suspects. Talk about a needle in a haystack.

The paid killer's only problem is to make contact with the employer in such a way as to excite no suspicion of collusion. My first commission came about quite by accident, in a London pub. I fell

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into conversation with this obviously wealthy man, who started pouring out the story of how he hated his wife and wanted to marry somebody else but dared not sue for divorce because he was dependent on his wife financially and would eventually inherit from her.

"I'd cheerfully kill her," he confessed, "except that I'd be the prime suspect and up for murder at the Old Bailey before you could say 'knife.' So *that's* no answer."

I suggested he come back to my place for a drink, although he'd had more than enough by then, and I put a proposition to him. Suppose *I* were to kill his wife? What would it be worth? He would, of course, arrange an impeccable alibi for himself. He would also provide the gun. Most of the money would be paid in cash, but a respectable amount—on which I would pay tax, scrupulously—would come to me as my fee as a freelance consultant to his firm. Or, to be exact, his wife's firm—inherited from her father—of which he was a director and would be owner after her death.

Quite naturally, he was suspicious as to my ability to carry out such a murder, but I was able to show him my Army trophies from Bisley and they convinced him. We amused ourselves thinking up a suitably ridiculous name for me as consultant. H. de Quincy Featherstone, Management Consultant, was the claim that eventually went up on the door of the office I rented in London. I deliberately chose a flowery and elaborate name because my own is short and prosaic. I had a feeling the if this first job went well H. de Quincy might get other clients. Word of mouth is the only form of advertising practicable in this business.

I have found through my long and so far successful career that women can be lured by greed for money—the "something for nothing" approach—while men can be lured by lust for sex, in whatever form it appeals to them. This first time, carefully coached by Mr. X, I telephoned Mrs. X and put to her a proposition which was just believable, by which she could make a lot of tax-free cash. I emphasized that we would have to meet discreetly somewhere in the country and that her husband should know nothing about it. She mentioned the weekend I knew he had arranged a business trip to the Continent.

I suggested she should tell him that in his absence she would visit friends in the country, which she duly arranged to do—at the same time making a rendezvous with me at a deserted spot en route. I'll

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always remember the look of utter amazement on her face when I pulled out the gun and shot her.

I then wiped the gun clean of fingerprints, to make quite sure, and buried it in the woods some distance away. It has never been found, but it wouldn't matter if it was. I had driven to the rendezvous several hours ahead of time and made sure my car was completely hidden from any passing traffic. After the shooting, I had only to make sure that the road was clear—it was little frequented, anyway—before I drove out again and back to London.

Mrs. X's friends raised the alarm some hours later when she failed to arrive at their house. A search was mounted and the police found the body the next day. Mr. X returned from Paris, distraught with grief. The murder is still on the police files, of course, but remains unsolved. There was nothing whatsoever to connect H. de Quincy Featherstone, who had once worked for a short time as management consultant to the firm, with Mrs. X. The two had never met. Might as well suspect the firm's accountant (who knew Mrs. X all too well according to some people) or their lawyer, or the tea-lady.

As I had hoped, Mr. X—thoroughly satisfied with the outcome of the affair—recommended other clients. Naturally, different methods were involved in each case. I presented myself to the victims under a whole number of various names and professions. Nevertheless, the office of H. de Quincy Featherstone remained the place to make contact with me for those in the know. I did not always have to come face to face with my victim as I had in the case of Mrs. X. Once he or she could be lured to a deserted spot, I could take aim from some suitable cover. One bullet was all that was ever needed. As I said, you have to possess that skill.

I had no fear that any of my clients would ever betray me. I always taped my first interview with each, explaining what I was doing and playing back enough damning evidence to convince them it existed. Actually, I always erased the tapes afterwards, as they would also have implicated me as well. Whether they existed or not was purely academic—the important thing was that the clients believed they did.

The only drawback to a profession like mine is that it is by nature a lonely one—and so I added a young lady to my solitary household. You may think it was a foolish move, but Lottie suited me to the ground. She was very beautiful, but not exactly an intellectual giant. In fact, her vocabulary and general understanding were very limited, and she had no idea of my real profession. I did talk to her

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about some of my problems, just to get things straight in my own mind before a case, but she simply smiled uncomprehendingly and said nothing. Her main concerns were food, drink, and affection—and I kept her amply supplied with all of them. In return, she put up patiently with my soliloquies and did whatever I told her.

Things were in this satisfactory state when I received a telephone call at the office one day.

"Is this H. de Quincy Featherstone?" The man's voice was heavily accented, although hard to place.

"Speaking," I said.

"I wish to make an appointment. For a consultation, you understand."

"Oh yes? May I ask who recommended me to you?"

He named a very rich client for whom I had neatly removed a business rival a short while previously. An excellent reference.

I said, "As you know, I am a management consultant. May I ask the nature of your business, sir?"

There was a small hesitation, and then he said, "I think it would be best if we were to discuss that privately, at your office. When can you give me an appointment?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "the office will be closed for a few days—I'm taking a short holiday. If your business is urgent, perhaps you could visit me at my holiday hotel."

This was standard practice, as his informant must have told him. He gave his name as Smith—they nearly all do—and a telephone number where he could be reached at certain brief periods of the day. A public call-box, undoubtedly. I promised I would ring him and give him the name of my hotel and my room number.

I made the necessary arrangements and the following day I was able to telephone Mr. Smith and inform him I would be in Suite 4 at the Majestic Hotel, Southbourne-on-Sea, for the next three days. I suggested he should visit me at 6 P.M. on the following day and ask for me under the name of Arbuthnot. Featherstone, I explained, was just a business name. I had to spell Arbuthnot twice before he got it right—his English was pretty shaky—but I've always refused to shelter behind such false names as Brown, Jones, or Robinson, as I consider them more dangerous than anonymous.

At five minutes past six the front desk telephoned to tell me a Mr. Smith was here to see me. I said to send him up.

Mr. Smith was a swarthy gentleman with a small black beard and I realized at once that the accent I had been unable to place was

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Arabic. Fortunately, I had some orange juice among the drinks in my suite—it was a favorite of Lottie's, as a matter of fact—because he naturally refused anything alcoholic, and in fact averted his eyes and gave the impression of muttering a prayer to Allah when I poured myself a modest Scotch and soda. Considering the mission on which he'd come, I should have thought that a drink or so wouldn't have added significantly to his list of sins on Judgment Day, but I'm not an expert on Islam and I understand that some killings are considered religiously justified.

In any case, he came straight to the point. "Let us be blunt. Your name is not Arbuthnot—" he got the pronunciation pretty well, I suspect he had been practising, "—*nor* is it Featherstone. You are prepared to kill for money. A lot of money."

"That's roughly the position," I said. "Of course, I have to be satisfied with the details and arrangements in each case."

He grunted. "I am empowered to offer you—" I won't name the sum, but it staggered even me "—to shoot the President of Bashara."

I have, of course, invented the name of the country concerned. I need only say that it is a Middle Eastern state, wealthy, and influential, which was at that time governed by a virtual dictator, who styled himself President and had distinctly right-wing leanings. He was also reported to be harsh in his dealings with overreligious Moslems.

I say the sum mentioned by Mr. Smith set my brain reeling—I could retire on it for the rest of my life and live with Lottie in some tropical paradise with no extradition laws—but I had my rules and I was not going to break them.

I shook my head. "Sorry," I said. "No political assassinations. I don't touch them."

"I think you will make an exception of this one."

"Look here," I said, "the thing is simply too risky, and I don't take risks. I've no idea how you propose to change the government in Bashara, or whether or not you'll succeed, but it's a gold bar to a tintack that the man who does the shooting won't ever find out. He'll be picked off by the President's bodyguard within seconds. After that he'll either become a national hero or a hissing and a byword, but it won't make any difference to him, because he'll be dead. If he's lucky. If he's just captured, and your side fails in its coup, he'll have an even worse time. I'm sorry, Mr. Smith. No religion, no politics. Those are my rules."

The liquid brown eyes gazed earnestly into mine. "You are gravely

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mistaken, my friend. We have the entire Army with us—also the police and even the President's bodyguard. We cannot fail. The moment that man is dead the country will rejoice and proclaim its new leader."

"In any case," I added, ignoring his last statement, "I thought that movements like yours always had plenty of—" I was going to say "fanatics" or "madmen," but I thought better of it "—plenty of enthusiastic supporters who are willing to risk death or capture. Get one of them to shoot the President. You don't need me."

Mr. Smith smiled. "You are right," he said. "We have brave men who are willing to risk the sacrifice. Unfortunately, we feel none of them is as likely to guarantee instant success. Let me outline our plan to you," he added wheedlingly.

"Oh, very well." I poured myself another Scotch. He had barely touched his orange juice. "But I've given you your answer."

"You are very kind." He smiled—as false a smile as I have ever seen, and I'm something of an expert. "One of our devoted band of followers has already undertaken to shoot the President. He will be in the crowd when the President unveils the statue he has had erected to himself in the main square of the capital city. You and he will be standing close together. You will have identical guns. His fingerprints will be on both weapons. At a signal from another of our group, you will both shoot.

"I can predict without a doubt that his shot will miss, and by a long way. Between ourselves, he is a hopeless marksman. Yours, of course, will not miss. In the ensuing panic, you will drop your gun to the ground. Meanwhile, he will be proclaiming himself as the assassin. In fact—for he is a simple soul—he will actually believe that he is. As I told you, this will be the signal for a general uprising, and a takeover by the Army. If my fanatical friend—" he used the word himself "—if he survives, he will be, as you said, a national hero. If not, he will be a revered martyr. Meanwhile, all interest will be centered on him. You will make your way as quickly as possible from the scene. If we have succeeded, as I am convinced we shall, you will be allowed to leave with no fuss. If by any chance we should be delayed—I will not say 'fail,' because I do not even entertain the thought—then you may be interrogated by the police. I am sure you are quite capable of surviving such an interrogation. You will have no incriminating weapon on you. Being English, you and Lottie will be part of a group of British visitors on a cheap package tour—as you know, Bashara is encouraging tourism. The

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ballistics experts may be puzzled to find two guns, but the bullet will match—"

I interrupted him. "How do you know about Lottie?"

"We know all about you." He took another sip of orange juice. "That is one of the reasons why you will accept this very simple job."

"Oh really? What are the others?"

"Just one other. You now know all about us, and our plans. Should you refuse the commission, we would be compelled to liquidate both you and Lottie. So, you see, you really have no choice, have you?"

"You're bluffing," I said. "I don't know how you found out about Lottie, but you don't know my real name nor where I—"

"Ah, but we do." He mentioned my correct name and my private address. Without even waiting to assess my reaction to this, he pulled out a wallet from his breast pocket and began counting out ten-pound notes onto the table. "We use no larger denominations," he said. "They might attract notice. You will see that all these are used notes, and they are quite untraceable. This is just an initial down payment, which will cover expenses and leave a considerable sum over. The remainder of the money has already been deposited in a numbered Swiss bank account. I myself do not know the number—nor does anybody else in our organization. It is written inside this envelope, for your eyes alone." From another pocket, he brought out an envelope, printed with the name of a reputable bank in Zurich, and sealed with sealing wax bearing the imprint of the Bank's insignia.

Mr. Smith went on. "You may go over to Zurich and check for yourself that the money is in the account, and that only you know the number. The manager will confirm that he himself wrote the number on a slip, placed it in this envelope, and sealed it. You can see that the seal has not been broken."

Frankly, I didn't believe that this couldn't have been faked, but I took the envelope just the same. Mr. Smith smiled.

"I am glad you are being so reasonable," he said. "We have already made bookings for you and Lottie—under your own names, why not?—on the Sunshine Econotour which leaves London on February fourth. You have only to pick up the tickets. This is nearly a month away, which will give you time to check up on the Zurich account. When you get to Bashara, which is the last stop on the tour—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "What's to prevent me from going to Switzerland, drawing all the money out of the account, and simply disappearing?"

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He went on smiling. "We would find you, never fear. However, what you suggest is not possible. As the bank manager will tell you, the money is there, but it is in the form of bonds which may not be cashed until February tenth—the day after the unveiling of the statue." He brushed aside any opposition as if it were a troublesome fly. "Now, to get to business. When you arrive at your hotel, you will be contacted by one of our agents—"

And so on. The scheme had been thought out down to the finest detail. When he had finished explaining it, Mr. Smith finished his orange juice and departed. And I was left with the prospect of my first political assassination on my hands.

I took the precaution of flying to Zurich, although heaven knows I didn't doubt that Mr. Smith's story would be confirmed. Whether it represented the whole truth or not was a different matter. I went to the bank, and in the manager's office I broke the seal on the envelope and extracted the slip of paper with the magic number written on it in ink. The manager beamed, confirmed everything I had been told, and even wrote the individual numbers—but in a different order—under my very eyes, so that I could see that the writing of the figures was identical. When I prepared to put the slip of paper into my wallet, he earnestly advised me not to carry it in such an obvious and easily lost place.

"If you cannot memorize it," he said in his perfect English, "I would advise you to write it someplace where it cannot readily be identified as an account number."

We finally agreed that a good spot would be in my diary, which I carried everywhere with me, on the Personal Details page. We listed it as the registration number of my car. We then shook hands warmly, and I returned to England.

The next day I went to Econotours and picked up the tickets for Lottie and myself on the Winter Sunshine Tour, which ended in Bashara. And in a couple of weeks we duly set out, a couple of English tourists escaping the wild northern winter as cheaply as possible.

The tour was pretty grim, as you can imagine—a group of non-descript, middle-income Britons being herded around battered Roman and Egyptian ruins and in and out of crumbling churches by a brightly efficient and patently bored courier. However, I did my best to merge inconspicuously into the party. Lottie, as usual, was very popular. She is a very pretty girl.

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At last we reached Bashara. We were told, as if it were a great treat, that the evening and the following day would be "free"—that is, without organized excursion. The courier suggested that some people might be interested in going to the main square to watch the unveiling of the presidential statue, but warned us to leave our valuables in the hotel safe in case of pickpockets in what would certainly be a huge crowd.

Shortly before dinnertime there was a knock on my door and a pageboy handed me a note he said had just been left for me at the front desk. It was unsigned but asked me to come "Alone, if you please" at half-past nine that evening to a large café much frequented by tourists.

I hoped that no other members of my group would be there to see me hobnobbing with suspicious local characters, but I need not have worried. Not only were they all so exhausted that a free evening was a blessed chance to go to bed early, but Mr. Smith—whom I recognized at once even though he had shaved off his beard—looked impeccably respectable and even English. He greeted me and ushered me to a booth where, amid the din of talk and laughter, we could chat quietly without fear of being overheard.

He ordered two drinks—beers, since we were supposed to be British. He didn't touch his, although I was glad of mine. When the waiter had withdrawn, Mr. Smith produced two color photographs from his breast pocket. The first showed a very dark young man wearing a bright-red shirt and red-and-white-striped trousers—a highly conspicuous outfit.

"My young cousin," said Mr. Smith blandly, "of whom we were speaking in London. The one who is so keen on your favorite sport. He is very proud of his new clothes and will certainly be wearing them tomorrow in honor of the occasion."

The second picture, I saw with some surprise, was of an obviously European gentleman, very fair, quite young, and conventionally dressed in a lightweight khaki suit such as are normally worn by the British in Bashara. It took me a moment or so to realize that this man must be a Russian.

"And here is my friend from Paris," Smith went on. "He is planning to attend the party with my cousin. I hope that you will see them both—" he lowered his voice, although it wasn't necessary "—about twenty feet from the platform and to the right of it—from

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the point of view of a person on the platform. To the left, facing the platform. You understand?"

"Perfectly," I said.

"Unfortunately," Mr. Smith added, "my friend from Paris has a nasty cold. He may have to reach into his pocket for a handkerchief. As he brings it out—well, I mustn't bore you any more with my snapshots. I trust you and Lottie are enjoying your tour?"

"Lottie seems to be," I said. "I've been on jollier jaunts myself."

Mr. Smith smiled. "The next jaunt," he said, "will be very jolly. By the way," he added, still smiling, "I must make it clear that it is part of our orders that you and Lottie—you two *only*—should go to the inauguration tomorrow. Don't bring along any friends from your holiday tour—or anybody else, for that matter."

"I don't see why I should take Lottie," I objected. "I don't like exposing her to danger. After all, she's only—"

"Please do not argue," interrupted Mr. Smith. "You will only do harm to both of you." He handed me a small paper bag. "Have a nice day tomorrow." And on that happy note, we parted.

The paper bag, as I found out when I got back to my hotel room, contained a small but efficient gun, fully loaded.

Lottie and I were up early next morning. The ceremony was scheduled for eleven o'clock, but when we reached the main square at eight it was already bustling with activity. Workmen were putting the finishing touches to the dais where the President was to stand, flanked by high-ranking officers and, of course, his bodyguard. The statue, which even allowing for the plinth must have been at least twice life-size, loomed like a Halloween ghost in the middle of the square, shrouded in white cotton.

Barricades were being erected so as to form a narrow pathway between the statue and the platform, but I was able to see that the President, who was no fool, had no intention of actually descending from the platform and so virtually into the crowd. The barricades were to prevent an overenthusiastic populace from trampling on and breaking the cord that led from the statue's shroud to the presidential dais. In theory at least, a snip of the golden scissors—or whatever was going to be used—would release the sheeting and reveal the statue. However, to do this the President would have to take a step forward, while the other occupants of the platform—including, hopefully, the bodyguard—would be standing rigidly at attention, arms raised in salute. I guessed that this would be the moment when Mr.

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Smith's friend from Paris would decide to blow his nose. It seemed a sweet setup to me.

I hadn't intended to hang around the square, for fear of being conspicuous, but in fact at half past eight there was already such a crowd that I felt it was high time to start maneuvering toward the spot indicated by Mr. Smith. Soon it would be impossible to move in any direction at all.

So Lottie and I idled in among the throng, even though she was obviously fed-up and beginning to complain, and I was gratified to see, just before nine, the bright-red shirt and striped trousers making their way toward the appointed place. The young man, whom I recognized easily from Mr. Smith's snapshot, was with a group of people his own age—students, apparently—and they all seemed to be having a good time, singing patriotic songs. The policemen and soldiers who were overseeing the crowd regarded them indulgently, smiling at the exuberance of youth.

Mr. Smith's friend from Paris, the presumed Russian, was nowhere to be seen—until he suddenly materialized himself at my side. It is, as I know, a difficult trick to move inconspicuously even in a crowd and I made a mental note that a first-class operator had been assigned to this job. Naturally, he gave no sign of recognition, but he made good and sure that I had seen him. Then, without hurry or fuss, he stationed himself in such a position that the red-shirted young man and I could both see him clearly. And so we waited.

The waiting was enlivened by rousing military marches played through loudspeakers, and at last a distant wailing of sirens indicated that the presidential motorcade was on its way from what had once been the royal palace. Amid wild cheering and waving of Basharan flags, the parade finally arrived in the space cleared behind the dais—first, an escort of motorcycle outriders, then huge black limousines which discharged dignitaries, military officers, and security men who took up their places on the platform.

At last, with more guards and escorts bringing up the rear, the President himself stepped out of the largest white closed car I had even seen—almost like a tank, and certainly armored. He mounted the steps to the platform to thunderous applause. I wondered where Mr. Smith was and exactly what he was planning for after the shooting. However, that was not my concern. I had a job to do, and I would do it.

It was laughably simple. Just as I had predicted, after making a few remarks in Basharan—which I did not understand, but took to

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be self-laudatory—the President stepped forward. The loudspeakers began to blare out the national anthem and the personnel on the dais froze into respectful immobility. The President was handed the golden scissors, and simultaneously Mr. Smith's Parisian friend reached in his pocket and brought out his handkerchief.

The two shots rang out, precisely at the same moment. I don't suppose that more than a tiny handful of people realized there had been more than one. The President had just time enough to look surprised before he fell. Ironically, the impact of his stout body broke the cord and the statue stood unveiled as its model died.

Pandemonium broke loose at once. The boy in the red shirt was waving his gun in the air uttering shrill cries of triumph while his companions sang the "Internationale." Everybody else seemed intent on getting away, but police and soldiers had sealed off all the narrow streets leading to the main square. I heard afterward that many people were trampled to death in the general stampede. A couple of the President's bodyguards had meanwhile recovered sufficiently to whip out their guns—and that was the end of the self-proclaimed assassin in the red shirt. Mr. Smith's friend from Paris had, of course, disappeared.

It began to occur to me that Mr. Smith's plans were not working out as he had hoped. He had assured me that the Army, the police, and the crowd would acclaim the killer and cheer their new leader. Instead, the wretched young fanatic was dead, his friends arrested, and the police and Army seemed to be in thorough control of the situation. I decided that it was high time for Lottie and me to follow the lead of the man with the handkerchief. I dropped my gun under the milling feet of the crowd and we disappeared.

Back at the hotel, things were buzzing. The news had come through the radio and television, and the tour operators had decided to cut short the trip and bring us all back to London immediately while our chartered plane could still take off. It seemed inevitable that the airport would be closed as soon as somebody in authority got around to ordering it.

The courier greeted us with a mixture of relief and exasperation. "Oh, *there* you are! Where on earth have you been? We were just going to leave without you. Onto the bus *at once*, please! Your bags have been packed for you and are on board. Have you any valuables in the hotel safe? No? That's good. Right, driver, let's go!"

Luckily, the hotel where we were lodged was on the same side of

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town as the airport. Our charter plane must have been one of the last to leave Bashara before all international flights were banned.

I wasn't at all surprised to find that both my wallet and my diary were missing. After all, hadn't we been warned against pickpockets, even without the added confusion of an assassination? I was glad I had taken the elementary precaution of memorizing the number of the bank account, destroying the original diary and buying an identical one, into which I wrote a number quite at random, and entirely unlike the actual account number. I also added, in a clumsy and easily breakable code, the initials of a well known Swiss bank where the money was *not* deposited. One learns to take every precaution. It could, of course, have been an ordinary theft, but my personal view was that my documents were now in the possession of Mr. Smith's friend from Paris.

The news filtered through slowly and inaccurately to the outside world.

At first it was announced that the President had merely been wounded, but by the evening Bashara Radio was forced to admit that he was dead. His assassin, a fanatical left-wing student, had been killed by a quick-thinking member of the presidential bodyguard. Nevertheless, it was believed that he was merely the tool of a large and sinister organization, whose members were being sought relentlessly by the security forces. There was as yet no indication of who would be the next President. Parliament—a rubber-stamp assembly—had been convened to discuss the question. And so on.

More and more, I became convinced that Mr. Smith and his friends had been duped by the man with the handkerchief. It was well known that the Russians disliked the right-wing régime of the late President, but I felt sure that they'd never had any intention of allowing a military takeover. They would make sure that the new President should be one of their own selected people, under orders from Moscow. As the world knows, I was right.

This put me in a delicate position. I flew to Zurich the next day by the earliest plane. It was the day of maturity for the bonds in which the money had been placed, and I was waiting outside the bank when it opened. I hoped I had fooled the man with the handkerchief, but I couldn't be sure. However, to my relief, the money was still there. I withdrew it all and redeposited it in another numbered account at a different bank in the city, keeping out enough to fly Lottie and myself to a South American country where I felt we would be reasonably secure . . .

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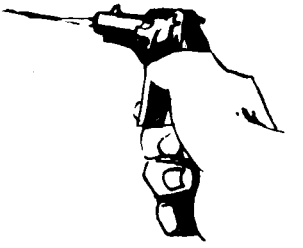
Once in this country, where we now are, I opened a bank account under my correct name and had the money transferred, bit by bit, from Switzerland. I bought a charming villa in the country, where Lottie and I now live very quietly. We've applied for permanent residence, and since in these parts palms can be greased—and I have no lack of grease—I think there will be no problem.

However, I have taken the precaution of putting a stout barbed-wire fence around the property, installing burglar alarms and perimeter searchlights, and buying several extremely fierce guard dogs. I hardly ever go outside the grounds. I suppose you could say—yes, you well might say—that it's not unlike being in a very luxurious top-security prison. But consider my position. Mr. Smith knows me. The gentleman with the handkerchief knows me. And I know too much. I always knew that I should never have got involved in a political assassination.

Incidentally, you may be wondering how Lottie and I were able to disappear from the main square in Bashara with such ease and speed after the assassination, considering that all exits were guarded by police and soldiers. Well, there's really no mystery. The Basharans are charming and courteous people by nature, and who was ever going to suspect a fragile young blonde Englishwoman, carrying a very pretty little eighteen-month-old girl? The crowd made way for the two of us, and the guards simply saluted, chucked Lottie under the chin as she sat perched on my shoulder, smiled, and let us through.



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This is the 601st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, the first of the next hundred we hope to bring you in these pages. In his covering letter, the author, Don Gilbert, wrote: "As you see, I'm not an expert typist and my spelling leaves something to be desired, but I enjoy stringing words together. I find the department in your magazine devoted to new writers of great interest. Likely hundreds of other beginners also do.

"Always wanted to write, and did for my own enjoyment, but kept my job as a painter and wallpaper hanger as a meal ticket. Now, retired at 78, I find I have more time for my hobby. I hope this effort is of enough interest to warrant a complete reading."

It is indeed . . .

TIME AND PLACE

by DON GILBERT

Danny Pertwee was dead-drunk. He lay sprawled on pine needles in a shadowy ravine, one hand flung out as if pointing to where a bubbling still dripped moonshine into a five-gallon jug.

Jed Davies stood over him regarding him dispassionately, his old face stern. After a moment he laid Danny's rifle back beside the youth, then he took off his gloves and stuffed them in his overall pocket.

Where the trail topped the ravine, Jed paused, his nostrils tasting the sour smell of mash on the hot air. Danny lay motionless, his long blond hair glimmering in the filtered light. Tight-lipped, Jed turned and hurried away on the woodsy trail.

It was late afternoon when he came to the cornfield on his land. Below lay the grey solitude of his home buildings, his few cattle patiently waiting in the barn lane. Beyond that, the sand fill of the railroad was umber in westering light.

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Where saber leaves brushed Jed's knees, he stopped and took down a scarecrow that leaned on a hoe handle. With this burden over his shoulder, he headed for the barn. As he let down the bars for his cattle to pass into their night enclosure, a whippoorwill set up its tentative chanting in the trees above the house, its lonely sweetness piercing him with sadness from a time past.

It was after nine o'clock, with the half moon quickening the summer night, when car lights bounced up the sandy lane from the main road. By that time Jed had chored, eaten a frugal supper, and was enjoying his evening smoke. When heavy steps sounded on the back stoop, he rapped ashes from his pipe but he waited for a knock before rising from his rocker.

"Who is it?"

"Sheriff Thompson," came a deliberate voice.

"Come in, Sheriff."

Sheriff Thompson was a gentle bear of a man. "Evenin', Jed. Glad to see you still had a light."

"Just finished my pipe. Somethin' I can do for you?"

"Might be."

Jed waited patiently.

"I got a call from Lester Pertwee this afternoon. My wife answered the phone and Pertwee said he wanted to talk to me after chores. Then he hung up. I came out after supper and found him dead, laid out on the kitchen floor with a bullet hole in his head. What's more, the night chores weren't done and the boy, Danny, was gone. I phoned my deputy and while waiting for him come down to talk to you."

Jed digested this. "Sheriff, you know the Pertwees and me don't neighbor."

Sheriff Thompson nodded uneasily and Jed knew he was remembering. Remembering about Danny and Kathy, Jed's daughter. Remembering too about Jed's dead wife, Ann, and old Lester Pertwee. But no one could say that Lester's bitter animosity toward the Davies had any true ground outside of his own twisted mind.

It had all begun some twenty years before, when Ann Strong took over the district school. Ann had been a lovely girl, filled with the vitality of youth. Lester had been the most substantial of the local bachelors who courted her, but she had treated them all with impartial friendliness. However, neighbors figured that if anyone won

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her it would be Lester. After all, the Pertwees were the most well-to-do family in the district.

Then Jed Davies came home from the piney woods for Christmas and went to the school program with his folks. When Ann and he met, there was no outward sign but from that night on there was no one else in the world for either of them. They were married in the spring and everyone in the valley came to the wedding except the Pertwees. Lester was so riled neighbors wondered if he might do harm to the young couple—maybe burn the farm building Jed's folks had given them. Instead, Lester up and married flighty Dilly Weaver and made it a point not to ask the Davies to the biggest shindig the county had ever known.

Yes, Lester was one to hold a grudge. He'd even gloated when Ann Davies died giving birth to Kathy.

Sheriff Thompson coughed apologetically. "I just wondered if you'd seen Danny."

"Not to speak of," Jed said, knowing the sheriff was sweating but bound to do his duty.

"After all, you're the closest neighbor to the Pertwees. Most people know Danny's selling moonshine, so you must know it too. I figured his old man was comin' to his senses and was callin' me in for help. Not that he ever seemed to want help before."

And he didn't need help this time, Jed thought, he was in back of everything Danny did! It wasn't him that made that phone call—that was me! Lester handled Danny easy enough, made him dance like a rag on a string. He disliked his son most as much as he hated me! He was gettin' revenge on Ann and me through our daughter! Danny didn't understand that. The weak never understand the strong and cruel. I guess Danny really loved Kathy—he just couldn't understand the hell his pa had planned for her. "I hear Danny was gettin' to be his own best customer," he said.

"True." Sheriff Thompson nodded. "And I figgered Danny and his pa got in a big row and the boy shot him. Only trouble is, he didn't run. The car and truck are both home in the shed."

"You'll know the tale when you find Danny."

"That's where you come in. Can you tell me where the still is?"

"I lived here all my life and if my neighbors leave me alone I leave them alone. However, were you to ask me for a likely place for a still I'd say the spring at the head of Rocky Run."

"Could you lead me there in the dark?"

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"You know how it would seem were we to find anything there. I'll lend you a lantern."

"You're right. I'll take the lantern."

After the sheriff left, Jed blew out the light and set in the dark. Outside he could hear a breeze whispering in the green ears of the trees, and he could smell the musky fragrance of early summer like the perfume of a waiting woman. He closed his eyes, listening, and, after a time, he heard light, running steps.

Is that you Kathy?

Pa, you shouldn't wait up for me. I'm a big girl now—I've got a job! I'm as old as Ma was when she married you!

He chuckled, the sound dry as the rustle of memory. Kathy was still a little girl to him, breathtakingly like her mother. Sometimes he didn't know quite how to cope with her—besides just loving her.

I always worry, Kathy. Isn't that what a pa is supposed to do? Did "George" bring you home tonight?

It was a joke between them. Every boy was "George."

Someday I'll marry, Kathy said. Until then you're my best beau.

Then she was nineteen, through high school and doing a bookkeeping job at the village store. It was only a mile to town and she often walked that. In the evening she did the housework, singing as she moved about. Jed didn't feel that his love was selfish. Almost certainly she didn't. Someday Jed wanted her to find a young man to love. He remembered his caring for Ann and he wished Kathy to know the same. He had lost Ann, and he knew that in a sense he would lose Kathy too, yet somehow he felt he would always have them both.

Kathy took the lamp. Come, Pa, it's time we were both in bed. But she stopped at the door and said:

Pa, tonight "George" was Danny Pertwee.

Jed's brain was an explosion of white light. He was unbelieving! Not that he really had anything against Danny. But he had never dreamed the boy was strong enough to flout his pa. Of course, Danny's ma had revolted and she had been no pillar of strength. Feather-headed Dilly Weaver had never realized Lester had married her to spite Ann. Still, by the time Danny was born she knew Lester was incapable of real love. She had run away with a traveling salesman, leaving her son with his father. Danny was blond as his ma, good-looking in her same weak way, quiet around his pa, and overbold away from home.

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Danny's our neighbor, Jed said, and I believe in being neighborly. Only—

Only what, Pa?

He felt helpless—an old man trying to reason with a beloved daughter who is suddenly a stranger. If only Ann were beside him. A woman was better at such talk. Danny was young and wild and old Lester was behind him in the shadows—crazy, vindictive.

Kathy, I really got nothing against the boy. But—you mustn't!

Pa, you're letting memory sway you. You stay up here alone too much. I'm just Danny's friend. And he needs a friend. I don't like his pa either. But Danny's different. He's not really wild. He's gentle and sweet—

Child, don't be deceived!

You're the one who's deceived!

She touched his cheek with her lips and ran to her room.

Jed felt he'd been too slow to act and yet too abrupt when he did act. He felt himself sinking in a mire of doubt. He felt he could only trust in time unraveling the spell Kathy was in. But he reckoned without the urgency of spring. Kathy turned absent-minded, dreamy. Then one evening she drove away on a date with Danny.

If I ever hurt you, Pa, it's not because I want to.

I'm sure of that, Kathy.

It was Lester Pertwee brought the news with the first brightness of day. He wheeled his farm truck up the lane and stopped where Jed stood in the barn door, leaning on a pitchfork.

Has the sheriff called you yet? Pertwee had rasped.

No. Jed's heart began to pound furiously. He remembered he had fallen alseep and never heard Kathy come home. Why should the sheriff call him?

Them damned fool kids, Lester said, Danny and your daughter. But you likely set them up to it! They ran off last night to get married! They had a flat tire afore they got to the county seat. They ran off the road and smashed up in a ravine. The car didn't set afire so no one found them until this morning. Kathy's dead, her throat cut in the windshield. Sheriff Thompson's bringing Danny home. He was pinned in the car, but he's alive.

Jed stared at Lester. There was maliciousness in the way the man's tongue darted out, licking his lips as if they tasted sweet. In that instant Jed realized Lester had been urging his son on, hoping

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to ruin Kathy's life with a marriage to the boy, still trying to even old scores.

Jed took a step from the barn, lifting his pitchfork as if it were a lance. Get out before I kill you, you old bastard!

But Lester was made of stronger stuff than his son. Although he knew the danger was real, he didn't flinch. There was only a whispery chuckle as he put his truck in gear.

"Wait time and place for just revenge," Jed whispered as he came out of his doze.

Car lights flashed across the room, making him blink, but he didn't turn up the light until there were heavy steps on the porch.

"Jed?"

"Yes, Sheriff, you said you'd be back." Jed opened the door.

"We found Danny and the gun. He's still so drunk we just dumped him in the deputy's car. I got Lester's body in mine. We did the night chore afore we left."

Jed nodded, feeling neither elation or fear.

Sheriff Thompson was diffident. "It's a lot to ask, considering everything, but I wondered if you'd go up and tend the Pertwee stock in the morning?"

"I don't mind. The grudge was Lester's all these years."

"Thanks. There'll be an inquest tomorrow afternoon. It might be well if you come into town, were there any stray questions."

"I'll come. Maybe the district attorney will want me to give an account of my doin's. Don't know I could prove anything."

Sheriff Thompson shook his head. "You won't have to. There's no doubt Danny did it, likely feeling just cause."

"Well, if it comes to questions you might ask the section boys. Seems like they were working on the railroad fill while I was chopping weeds in my corn. Maybe they saw me. I was there off and on most of the day. Sometimes I get to thinkin' and don't move much."

That was what he had told Tony, the section boss, once when Tony asked him, "Why you don't move, Jed? You sick?"

"No, Tony, I just get to thinking."

"You remember the old times?" Tony had said. "Sometimes I remember the old country—"

And Jed was sure Tony did. Far from his homeland, he would hear voices too.

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Jed went to town after dinner and stopped at the sheriff's office. The sheriff looked beat—this thing was too close to home.

"I did the chore at the Pertwees'," Jed said. "You want I should keep on till this thing is ironed out?"

"I'd appreciate it. You don't have to stay for the inquest. If we need you, we know where to find you. It all looks cut and dried. Doc says Lester must have been shot right after he called me. He likely was expecting trouble. Danny admits he must have done it. He'd thought of it often enough after Kathy was killed. But he was too drunk to remember a thing." The sheriff smiled briefly. "You said maybe Tony and his crew saw you in the cornfield. Well, they did—all afternoon. Only Tony said you were 'remembering,' not 'working.'"

"I'll be going then." Jed hesitated at the door. "Sheriff, I'd like to speak to Danny if it's O.K."

"Sure, Jed."

"I just want to tell him I'll look after things. I really never had mean feelin's toward the boy."

And that was so—to an extent. His mind was murky. He thought perhaps he wanted to gloat a little, just as Lester had gloated when Kathy was killed. He believed, however, that he did feel some compassion for the boy who had really been only the weakest link in the twisted chain of events.

Jed stood outside the cell and looked at Danny. Sheriff Thompson had brought the youth clean clothes and he had shaved. He looked very young and bewildered.

"Danny, I'll take care of your stock until things get settled."

Danny gripped the cell bars. "I don't give a damn about the farm! I hate the place! Something like this was bound to happen even if I hadn't killed Kathy. And I did kill her! I loved her and I still love her, but in spite of that something bad was bound to happen. Pa would have seen to that! Pa was mean and I'm no good! I *wanted* to do what I did to Pa—only I can't remember doing it! Isn't that crazy?"

Jed thought, It was easy for your pa, Danny boy, but you're having a hard time of it. I do wish it could have been the other way around but I couldn't manage that.

He went home and chopped up the scarecrow frame for kindling. Late in the afternoon he went and did the Pertwee chores, feeling neither completion nor aversion. He went slowly over what had

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happened the previous afternoon, but it was outside himself now and the figures he saw were cardboard with no more feeling or sense.

He saw himself looking down the ravine where the boy lay beside his homemade still.

He thought: This is the time and place. He put on his worn gloves and went down and picked up the boy's rifle. Half an hour later he stepped into the Pertwee kitchen. When Lester knew he was there and why, he was no longer mean or vindictive.

Don't be crazy, man! I didn't mean for Kathy to be killed!

I know that. You only wanted to kill her spirit. If Danny married her and brought her here, you could do that slowly, getting revenge for a past and fancied grievance.

Danny don't really share your blame—you've twisted him since birth. Just the same, he's going to suffer. The thing that bothers me is that you have the easy part!

Then he shot Lester Pertwee, made a phone call to the sheriff's home, and took the gun back to Danny. What he had done did not bother him at first and it was still unreal. He had thought of the deed so often it was like an event long past.

Now he did the Pertwee chores, went home and did his own, ate supper, then went to his rocking chair for his evening pipe. Always, at such moments, he could feel the ghostly but very real presence of his wife and daughter. He knew this feeling was only within himself, a memory so real that he could converse with them and even feel their touch in the darkness.

Tonight, however, there was nothing. Nothing but the moonlight and a fitful breeze whimpering in the tree. He shivered, hunched in his rocker, and it came to him suddenly, like a blow in the face, that he was alone. The knowledge was a vise squeezing the juice from his heart. He could not weep. He could hardly breathe. Finally he passed into a state that was not unlike a drugged sleep.

At first there was nothing, and than a dream began to form. Yet it was more than a dream. Hands touched him, lifted him up. He knew to whom those hands belonged. His wife and daughter were guiding him along a dark corridor. At first he held back, trying to speak, to explain, because he knew what they wanted him to do. After a time he gave up and followed where they led. He came awake slowly, as a child does, and found himself standing in the outer doorway. Far in the east he saw the first pearly light of dawn.

Because he could no longer feel the hands on his arms, he started groping like a blind man seeking assurance.

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In the distance he heard voices, real as life. Jed—Pa—we're here. We'll wait.

He stood straight then and in a strong voice, like that of the young man who had come down from the piney woods to meet his own true love, he said, "Yes, I'll do the right thing, and I'll be along soon!"

At once he felt an abiding peace. After chores, he would go down and tell Sheriff Thompson. He only hoped Danny Pertwee had gained some iron from the stark reality that had confronted him for a little time. As for himself, nothing in the present really mattered.

He had Ann and Kathy now and forever.

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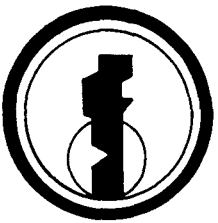

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Not everybody was afraid of the Scouts. There were those who would look on a contract with Amalgamated Talent Agencies as a lucky break.

In this latest Baytown story, William Bankier projects into that town's not-so-distant future, and perhaps into ours . . .

BREAKING FREE

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Casey Logan went on serving glasses of draft beer from his tray and tried to ignore old Jamie MacLeish making significant signs at him from a table in the corner of the beverage room. The foxy green eyes were more than Logan could bear to look at, especially with those conspiratorial winks flashing like a signaling lamp through the smoky atmosphere.

"Must talk to you, son," the old man had said to him an hour ago.

"I'm pretty busy right now, Jamie."

"I'll wait. Could be life and death."

All Logan wanted to do was close the place at eleven, go home and give his mother part of his pay, and get to bed. He was tired from performing at the dance last night at The Maples near Three Mile Lake. Tomorrow night would be even more exhausting because he was going to do his complete act. The last thing he needed was a session with Jamie MacLeish.

Clement Foy came in and took the last two glasses of beer from the tray. He sipped from one as he sat down, leaving a flash of foam on his moustache. Foy was tall and slim and he wore a double-breasted suit with the jacket hanging open like an oven door. His glossy hair was oiled and parted and brushed patent-leather smooth.

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"Help yourself, Clem."

"Were these reserved for somebody?" Foy finished the first glass and plonged it back onto the tin tray. "You were in good voice last night, my son."

"Thanks. Will you be at The Maples tomorrow?"

"I'm sitting in with the band."

"Good. I hope to do a new song. Lyric by my sister Maureen."

At eleven o'clock, Logan refused all pleas for more beer and chivvied the drinkers out the doorway and into the street. It was the hottest summer in Baytown's recent history. Some said there was one as hot back in 1980, but Casey Logan had been a child then and couldn't remember. The humid air-mass over southern Ontario smelled and felt as if it had moved up from Louisiana.

Jamie MacLeish was at his elbow. "We better go back to my place. I don't want anybody listening in."

"Can't you tell me while I clear up?"

"I'll wait for you here." The retired pipe major sat down on the stone step. "I have a wee bottle of whisky in my room. You'll need a drink when you hear what I've got to tell you."

Logan hustled glasses to the bar, emptied ashtrays, swabbed tabletops, and swept the floor. He looped his white mess jacket over a hook and put his arms into the blue-striped seersucker given him for his birthday by Bernice. It was an expensive jacket and it made him appear big-league. Bernice Howard had that effect on him—she made him look and behave up-market. The singing dates at local clubs had been her idea. Left to himself, he'd still be getting out the old guitar only when coaxed by friends at parties.

Jamie's room wasn't far away. They walked across the market square, past the police station, past the armory with its brick turret, inside which Jamie MacLeish in his active years could have been heard most evenings practicing the pipes. They entered a doorway next to the liquor store and climbed a flight of wooden steps worn concave. Jamie rattled a key in the lock and let Logan into a place that smelled of furniture polish.

When the light came on, Logan was surprised to see that the room was sparsely furnished and neat as a pin. The cot was made, military brushes rested side by side on the dresser, spare boots—brightly polished—stood smartly at attention beside a cheap full-length mirror fastened to a cupboard door.

"Sit ye down," Jamie said.

Logan balanced himself on the edge of a cane-backed chair and

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watched his host open a door in an oak sideboard. Inside, a bottle of scotch whisky stood like an actor waiting to make an entrance. The bottle was untouched—perhaps Jamie had bought it today for this occasion, using pension money he could ill afford. As the old man cracked the seal, Logan decided to smarten up and stop being so negative. Have a drink, keep the piper company, and listen to what he had to say.

Jamie poured two generous glasses and handed one to his guest. "Lang may your lum reek," he said before he drank.

"Wi' somebody else's coal." Everybody in this part of Canada knew the Scottish toast that invokes the benefit of having your chimney smoke at no cost to yourself.

"Now then, lad." Jamie drew a chair close and sat facing Logan. Crimson cheeks, a filigree of blue veins. "I won't waste words. It's the Talent Scouts."

Logan's stomach suddenly felt empty. "What about the Talent Scouts?"

"They're coming to get you."

"Why me? I don't see them coming after me."

"I know what I'm saying. I've spent time in the Pleasure Dome."

It was true. You could still catch an occasional film on the late show that was set, perhaps, in Imperial India and there, at a regimental dinner, would be the pipe major in full regalia playing "The Road to the Isles" or "Rowan Tree." That would be Jamie MacLeish in his prime, soloist with the internationally famous Baytown Kilties Band, which had toured America and Europe before the war. Now he left his pipes at home and could be seen at the ballpark of a summer evening, patroling the third-base line between innings, playing a lament on the chanter.

"I recognized two of them this morning," Jamie went on. "They were eating in the Paragon Café. I heard what they said. They said young Logan could be a candidate. They'd heard you perform. They were going to telephone ATA about offering you a contract."

Not everybody was afraid of the Scouts. There were those who would look on a contract with Amalgamated Talent Agencies as a lucky break. Some would welcome life inside the Pleasure Dome. But Casey Logan sat with the bitter taste of whisky in his mouth and felt as if a trap was closing around him.

"Could you be mistaken, Jamie?"

"They were Scouts all right. I remember seeing those two in the commissary at the Dome."

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Logan swallowed the remains of his drink and refused a refill. "I'd like to know how they found out about me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure. I suppose I'll have to try disappearing for a while."

Easier said than done, he realized as he left Jamie's place and headed up the hill toward home. He could imagine himself telling Bernice they would have to postpone the wedding. He could just hear what she would have to say about that.

There was a car parked outside the house. Its paintwork gleamed under the streetlight like a fat black beetle, the only one on the street. Gasoline at five dollars a gallon had long since ruled out the private use of automobiles in Baytown. Clement Foy hired a minibus to take the band to engagements and the cost of the gas was built into his fee. Logan looked at the license plate—New York State. It could mean only one thing—Talent Scouts sitting in his house after midnight. He would have to choose his words carefully.

They were all in the living room, empty coffee mugs on tables, the air dense with cigarette smoke. Logan kissed his mother and handed over her share of his pay. She was reclining in the big leather chair with her feet propped on a hassock, the floorlamp back-lighting the explosion of her unkempt hair. Years ago, Edna Logan had given up her appearance—the rusty housedress and torn slippers testified to that. Only her mind remained clean and sharp, honed by the reading of three books a day. When she became angry, she was temporarily insane, but those volcanic periods were fewer and farther between this past year. Casey Logan enjoyed coming home these days.

She dropped the cash in her lap on top of a book and a reading glass. "These men say they've got good news for you," she said.

"Very nice." Logan smiled at the men, but turned to kiss his sister. "Hi, Maureen."

She grasped his hand and held it as if he was about to be sucked away from her into a whirlpool. "Hello, little brother. It felt as if you were never coming home." The wide eyes stared up at him, pale pupils like the cloudy glass alleys he had played games with as a boy. Yes, time passed slowly for the blind.

"I know. Slow cleanup tonight. And we stayed for a drink—it was the bartender's birthday."

The Scouts were on their feet. The tall one got a laugh as he ducked to avoid the outlandish chandelier that belonged in a room

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three times the size of this one. He must have hit his head upon entering. "Casey Logan—it's a great pleasure to shake your hand."

"Thank you." The tall man was grey, powdered, wrinkled—eyes jellied, teeth too perfect to be true. The short one wore wire-framed, tinted glasses and smelled of cologne. Logan would have been glad to walk away from them anywhere. "Everybody sit down," he said. "What's this all about?"

"We represent ATA—the Amalgamated Talent Agencies." The tall man was the spokesman.

Logan managed to look surprised and pleased. "Ah."

"Your special abilities as a singer and songwriter have come to our attention and, as you probably know, we're always looking for new talent."

"I play the guitar and sing and I write some of my material, but a lot of the lyrics come from my sister Maureen."

"Then we may end up offering Maureen a contract, too."

Everybody laughed—all except Maureen, who was listening to the panic concealed inside her brother's tone of forced enthusiasm.

"How did you discover me?" Logan asked, playing the modesty up, the outrage down.

"Real talent always comes to the fore. One person tells another. But let's get to the interesting part." The tall man sat back and crossed a leg displaying a diamond-patterned sock that looked as if it had been knitted at home. "We've been authorized to offer you a contract that will pay the ATA minimum of thirty thousand a year. But I can guarantee you'll double that in your first year. Hamnitz is rehearsing a new variety series and there's no way you won't land a spot."

"Wow." It was all Logan needed to say and there was some sincerity behind his reaction. The name Hamnitz was the leading credit on most of the music shows on television.

The Scout was relaxing, getting into his swing. "But the money is only part of what we have to offer. You would also receive the protection of the Pleasure Dome."

"Do I need it?"

"You may not appreciate its importance now because you aren't famous. But wait till your name begins to get mentioned on the air and your face appears in magazines and on the screen. That's when the fans will get after you."

"Oh, Mr. Logan!" The other Scout put on a childish voice. "May

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I please have your autograph?" His voice changed. "Then while your're signing—bang, you're dead."

"I don't expect to be that famous."

"It began with superstars like John Lennon. His murder was predicted by Woody Allen in the film *Stardust Memories*, where the hero fantasizes being shot by a fan. Within ten years the mortality rate among singers and actors was so high they couldn't afford their insurance premiums."

The smaller Scout came in again. "At first we didn't worry. A murdered performer was good box-office, good record sales, and film reruns. And biographies. We were getting ten percent of a boom business."

"I won't lie to you," his partner said. "There were rumors that one or two of the early assassinations were contract jobs laid on to produce a final payoff from a career that was dying anyway."

"I never heard that."

"But, Casey, listen. You know the history. When the killings got out of hand, we had a meeting. We formed ATA and we established our first protected compound on the West Coast. It's there today, sort of a big Olympic Village. Fenced off, guarded at all times. The stars live there in superaccommodation. All the music facilities are there, film studios, broadcasting units. The new place back East with its plastic cover even keeps out the rain and snow."

"And helicopters with snipers," the other man said.

"So the stars are absolutely safe. Since we set up the Pleasure Domes, not one killing of an established show-business personality has taken place."

After a pause, Logan said, "And they never come out."

"They don't want to come out. They have everything inside." The tall man detected some reluctance in Logan's manner. "I know what you're concerned about," he said. "You must have read about that guard last summer. The one who machinegunned the party by the swimming pool—killed two singers and that actress. Okay, he got his face on the cover of *Newsweek* and that's what he wanted. But the leak has been plugged. Our screening procedures are much improved and it won't happen again."

A contract had been produced and was spread flat on the coffee table. Logan picked it up. "This is really terrific," he said, the boy on Christmas morning with the toy he doesn't want. "Can I keep it and read it over and think about it?"

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"No problem. Always read the small print. We'll be back at ten in the morning."

When the men were gone, Edna Logan said, "What's the matter?"

"He doesn't want to spend his life inside the Pleasure Dome," Maureen said.

"He'd be famous. He could make a fortune."

"But he'd rather be free."

Despite his fear, Logan smiled to himself. His mother and his sister always discussed him as if he were not in the room. He hated the idea of leaving them but there was no other way—he was going to have to run and hide.

Logan set down his suitcase outside the principal's office. He had not been observed leaving his house at nine o'clock. Last night's act had gone over well with the Talent Scouts—they would expect to find him at home, pen in hand, when they arrived at ten for the signing.

It felt strange to be back in the high school, especially during summer vacation. The polished corridors, the rows of lockers with doors hanging open, the silence. Eight years ago, Casey—then only sixteen—had raised the roof in assembly with his songs based on school characters and activities. Mr. Turnbull had referred to Logan as Baytown's own minstrel, a throwback to an age when history was recorded in song.

Bernice was typing inside the office. He opened the door, carried his suitcase through, and set it by the counter. She stopped typing, her face lighting up when she saw him, but at the sight of the luggage she raised her eyebrows.

"I don't have long to talk," he said.

She came to him at a run as she always did, embraced him with both arms around the neck, a vicious hug like that of an undisciplined child. "It's all right—Mr. Turnbull isn't here yet. Where are you going?"

"I have to get away." He told her about the visit of the Scouts, the contract they wanted him to sign.

"Would that be such a bad thing?"

"It would mean years, perhaps the rest of my life, inside that compound. All right, there'd be money, there'd be clothes, food, drink, a big house. But none of that means a thing if you aren't free to go where you want."

"Out here you can be killed."

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"Not if I don't become famous. And I intend to remain a local entertainer. That's enough for me." He glanced at his watch. "I have to keep moving, Bernice." Everybody knew the stories. The Scouts could inject something into a reluctant performer and he'd wake up inside the Pleasure Dome. No authority ever confronted the ATA—not with the money they had to throw around.

Bernice frowned. When Logan met her as a teenager at a dance in the school gym, her chestnut hair was parted in the middle, braided, and the twin plaits coiled over her ears. She had worn a pastel sweater set, her arms out of the sleeves of the cardigan, which was draped over her shoulders and fastened by one button at the neck. She was dressed the same way today. All that was missing were the two-tone loafers. Instead, her sturdy calves were made tense by stiletto pumps. "Where are you going to hide?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. I'm going to see Clem Foy and ask him if he can put me somewhere."

She turned to the counter and made geometrically square a stapler, a ruler, a pair of scissors, a box of envelopes. "What about the wedding?"

"We'll have the wedding." It had gone right out of his mind.

"When? The minister's arranged for two weeks from now."

"I'm not sure how long I'll have to stay out of sight."

"It better not be too long." She gave him an ambiguous smile. "Or we'll have to do the christening the same day."

That face would be the baby's face as soon as it could sit up and make demands. Logan drew Bernice to him and kissed her cheek, surprised to taste salty dampness. "We'll get married soon, don't worry. The first thing is for me to go underground. I can't be the main talent the Scouts are after. They'll get bored and go away."

"Will you let me know where you are?"

"As soon as I know myself."

In his short life so far, Casey Logan had never known any people as quick on the uptake as musicians. Maybe it was because they were overgrown children who lived in a semi-fantasy world. Clement Foy grasped the situation in seconds and knew exactly what had to be done.

"First we eat," Foy said, popping slices of bread into the toaster. "Then we load some food for you into a plastic bag." He looked at an alarm clock on the window ledge. They were in Foy's dilapidated cottage on Station Road, a place more like a cabin than a town

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dwelling. "The Marmora bus goes past in twenty minutes. We'll be at the stop."

The bus was almost empty. In a seat near the back, Logan began to relax for the first time since the interview last night. Foy, although he was unshaven and clearly hungover, lit up a thin cigar and sat erect in such a way as to resemble a bank manager down on his luck.

"I'll have to miss the dance tonight," Logan said. "I was booked to do a set."

"I'll tell them. I'll explain."

"They'll expect me tomorrow at the beverage room."

"I'll go in and make an excuse. I'll say you've been called away."

"Tell them the truth—say I'm hiding from the Talent Scouts. People are on my side."

"Not everybody."

"What?"

"Somebody got them to come and take a look at you."

They left the bus at the intersection of the county highway and a gravel road leading to Three Mile Lake. Had they stayed aboard for another fifteen minutes, they would have arrived at The Maples. "I'll be able to walk over there from here later in the afternoon," Foy said as he led Logan down the road and into the trees.

His country cabin was in marginally better repair than the cottage on Station Road. Neither the screen door nor the flimsy door behind it was locked. "There's nothing in here to steal," the musician explained. "And if I kept it locked I'd only have the expense of repairing it when they kick it down."

He started a fire of pine logs in the fireplace, put some kindling and some coal in the old iron stove, and soon had a kettle boiling. "Sorry there's no booze," he said cheerfully as he made instant coffee.

They sat at a gritty table, drank the coffee, and ate biscuits from a cellophane package. Foy agreed the Talent Scouts would not hang around long. "Bigger fish to fry," was his opinion. "No offense."

"I have to come out soon because Bernice and I want to get married."

"Say no more." Foy inhaled a draft of coffee. "What happened, was the drugstore closed?"

"I think I was trapped." Logan had thought about it often. "Never mind. When a woman loves you so much she wants to have your baby it isn't exactly an insult."

"But it's a life sentence."

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"Do you know anybody who isn't serving one?"

Later, shaved and ready to start walking over to The Maples, Foy was remembering the old days at the radio station. "You were the worst announcer I ever hired," he said companionably. "And considering the standards of CBAY, that's pretty bad."

"I never claimed to be a news reader." Logan was not offended. "I'm a singer."

"Still, we had fun." Foy began to reminisce about the golden years when he was chief announcer, Baytown's leading radio voice. Then the combination of too much whisky and late hours with Clem Foy's Serenaders led to his going on the air noticeably drunk. The audience didn't mind but a sponsor complained and Foy had to go.

"Remember the fun we had with the World Series? It always seemed to be that beautiful October weather, warm and dry." CBAY took a network feed each day from noon till whenever the game ended so there was nothing for the local announcers to do but deliver a station break on cue every half hour. "We put chairs on the sidewalk outside that station and a loudspeaker in the window of the record library, sat out there with a Coke and a bag of peanuts, and listened to the game."

"And when the network announcer gave the cue," Logan said, "one of us would barrel up the stairs to reach the studio in the twenty seconds they left clear for station identification."

"Most of the time we made it."

The sun had dropped behind the pines. They were sitting on the porch in rickety chairs. Logan shivered in the shade. He reached out and punched Foy's arm, now splendid in his glen-check bank jacket. "Thanks for all the good times, Clem."

Foy got to his feet and had to stoop to avoid hitting the porch roof. "Don't talk as if they've ended," he said.

That first night alone in the cabin was the worst time for Logan. The night air became cold so near the lake. He found a coat and spread it over the blankets on his bed but it wasn't enough. He ended up loading more logs on the fire and sleeping in a chair with hot legs and a cold, stiff back.

In the morning, after eating some breakfast, he began to feel better. The sun rose above the trees and filled the yard with light and warmth. He drew a chair onto the carpet of baked earth and pine needles and settled back to sunbathe. He was doing all right. Surviving that depressing night left him with a feeling of accom-

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plishment. Early man must have experienced this feeling every morning he found himself alive. Perhaps birds and animals did, too. Safe, heated houses were fine but they robbed man of this sense of winning the battle.

His mother had not been happy to see him take to the hills. After the Talent Scouts drove away from the house and he revealed his intention, she had said,

"You'd be safe in the Pleasure Dome, Casey. And well off. Your career would prosper."

"I want to be free, Mom."

"Freedom is a state of mind. They've put people in prison, in solitary confinement, even, but such a person can remain free if he chooses—more free than a President."

"I want to be able to roam around the country. I don't want to be recognized by strangers. I want to walk in somewhere and have toast and coffee and walk out again."

"You're her baby," Maureen said. "She wants you to be safe."

Logan's thoughts shifted to Bernice Howard. From the moment she mentioned being pregnant, the idea had pleased him. Some guys he knew, school friends, had gone around looking hangdog when it happened to them, saying they'd been trapped. But Logan could imagine himself in a room with a crib and a baby in it. A baby girl. She had short blonde hair and a moist, pink face. He lifted her—she was the weight of a bag of groceries, but solid and warm and smelling of soap, and one small arm went across his shoulder. Then he was sitting in another room and his daughter trotted in to see him. She was older now, wearing a tartan frock with a white lace collar and black patent-leather shoes. She stood beside his chair and he put down his newspaper while she told him something. Then she began walking around and around the coffee table, her thumb in her mouth, her eyes half closed. He watched her, hypnotized, happier than he had even been . . .

The sun was too hot—he'd be burned at this rate. Logan moved his chair into the shade. He should have brought his guitar. He needed the instrument to compose music properly, otherwise the melodies vanished from his head. Maureen had given him a good verse the other day—it would make a fine lyric. He had memorized the lines:

All my life I lived aloof,
Too honest, too intelligent,

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To buy Religion's argument
As sold by the Establishment.

Then I closed my eyes one day
And saw a shape in formless dress.
"I know you're there," I told myself.
Back came a flood of friendliness.

This new awareness softens life,
It comforts me, yet brings me fear—
What if I close my eyes one day
And my companion isn't here?

Later, after five o'clock when Logan was beginning to think about food, he heard the sound of an engine in bad repair. He went to the front door and saw a battered pickup truck approaching along the gravel lane. Before he had time to register alarm, he recognized Clement Foy's grinning face behind the windshield.

He ran to the truck, reaching it as it parked, and helped his friend unload a box of groceries and a couple of six-packs. "Where did you get the wheels?"

"My saxophone player does painting jobs when he can get them. The truck belongs to him."

"The gas must be costing you a fortune."

"The tank was full and I promised to return it the same way. I'll be asking you for a contribution."

They carried everything inside and soon the cabin was full of the aroma of frying steaks and mushrooms and onions. Foy was euphoric. "Why do we live any other way?" he asked, his moustache white with beer.

Logan set a table on the porch and they ate out there in the balmy best of the evening. It was hard for either man to remember a better dinner. With a pot of hot coffee between them and Foy's cigar releasing a pleasant reek into the air, they put a strain on ancient chairs as they leaned back and propped their feet on the porch railing.

"I had a phone call from Bernice Howard today," Foy said after a comfortable silence.

"What does she want?"

Foy laughed. "To get married. She didn't mind the fact that I know all about you two. She wanted me to tell her where you're hiding."

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"How did she know to ask you?" Then Logan remembered. "Oh, yeah. I told her at the school I was coming to see you."

"I said it wouldn't be a secret if anybody knew besides myself. But she's a persuasive girl."

"I know."

"She argued that you might be out of sight for weeks. And she isn't becoming any less pregnant."

Logan could guess what was coming.

"She said she wants to organize the minister to come out and do the ceremony with me as witness. Then whatever happens, at least the kid is legal."

"So you told her where I am."

"I ran out of arguments. Did I do the wrong thing?"

"No, it's okay. She's probably right—the sooner we get married, the better."

Half an hour later, Foy emptied his glass and stood up. "I'm going to have to go while it's still light. One of the headlamps on that wreck is out." He moved off the porch. "Sorry to stick you with the dishes, but it'll give you something to do."

Logan watched the truck back and turn and creep down the lane between dark trees, watched the pale hand waving. He felt let down, depressed. Why? He could expect a visit soon from Bernice and the minister. That would be a happy day.

He was in the kitchen with his hands in a pan of hot sudsy water when he heard an approaching engine. Clement Foy had decided to come back! He dried his hands and was on his way to the door when his mind reacted to what he was hearing. This was not the cough and grumble of the pickup's engine. This vehicle was running smoothly.

From the doorway, he saw the black sedan roll across the carpet of pine needles and stop beside the porch. A New York State license plate gleamed in the fading light. The taller Scout climbed out first, squinting at the cabin, tucking his shirt into his chalk-stripe trousers. The shorter man got out from behind the wheel and slammed the door, twirling the key from its ring as he followed his companion to the porch step.

Too late, Logan thought of running. But it would be pointless. They knew he was here and the dish-washing in progress would prove he hadn't gone far. It was light enough for them to chase and

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catch him. If he managed to escape, it would mean a night alone in the woods.

He opened the screen door. "This is a surprise."

"We thought we'd come out and get that contract you've been studying." The tall man's voice was genial. "After the enthusiastic reaction at your place the other night, we could only think there must have been a misunderstanding about when we'd do the signing."

The three men stood in the middle of the living room. There wasn't much light and the air was beginning to turn cool again. "I don't want to go to the Pleasure Dome," Logan said.

"We knew that from the start. Why don't you want to?"

"I'd rather stay here, doing what I'm doing."

The man sighed. He had been through it all before. "What you're saying is you want the world to stop turning, everything to stay the same. It doesn't work that way. Things change. You either fade away and become another alcoholic local who never fulfilled his promise or you improve, you become known."

"You're going to be famous," the small man said. "We don't make mistakes about talent. We watched your show the other night. Within a year most of the world will know your name and your face."

"And when that happens, it's only a matter of time. Out comes the gun or in goes the knife."

"Don't look to the police," said the tall man. "They can't search thirty thousand people at a concert. They can't stop everybody on a street."

"Can't they arrest the psychopaths and lock them up?"

"They aren't all psychopaths. That was earlier. Now it's any person who wants to give his experience a boost. And why not? Are they beaten, executed, placed in solitary? No, they become celebrities, they collaborate on a book."

"In which role do you think the average bored American would rather spend the rest of his life?" the smaller Scout asked. "As Joe Cipher doing a stupefying job with a dream of drawing social-security or as The Man Who Shot Number One on the Hit Parade?"

"Then what's the answer?" Casey asked. "You make it sound hopeless."

"Nothing is hopeless. The answer is the Pleasure Dome." The tall man held out his hand for the contract. Logan went and got it from

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a side pocket in his suitcase. "Can we get a little light in here?" the man said, producing a gold pen.

Logan switched on a lamp. "I still don't want to sign this."

"Marvin?" Logan watched as the other man took out a leather case. He opened it to reveal a hypodermic syringe and a phial of colorless liquid. "You can come back with us asleep, on approval so to speak. After a few days in the Dome, you can sign. It's all the same to us but we prefer it if you come in awake."

They heard the sound of the approaching pickup truck together. The engine cut out some distance away. The Talent Scouts glanced at Logan. "That's the old farmer," Casey said, surprised at his ability to improvise. "You must have seen his place on the other side of the woods."

"Sign the contract, Casey."

Logan wondered what Clem had in mind. "All right. I see there's *no point arguing*."

"A year from now you'll wonder why you made a fuss."

They told him to forget the dishes, they wanted to get back to Baytown to collect his gear, then on to the border at Watertown. Logan gathered his few belongings into the suitcase and followed the tall man onto the porch. The smaller one had gone ahead to start the car, but the vehicle remained dark and silent, the doors closed. As they approached it, they both saw him at the same time, flat on his face on the ground.

"What the hell—"

It was all the Scout had time to say. Clement Foy raised himself from behind the car and came at a run. The Scout knew how to fight. He was beating Foy off when Logun swung his suitcase in an arc and caught him on the side of the head. The tall man staggered and Foy got lucky with a perfectly timed roundhouse right that connected with his jaw. The Scout's legs buckled and he fell straight down.

"That was a good entrance, Clem."

"I was driving back when I recognized their car on the highway. The New York plates were a giveaway."

Logan bent over the man. "I'm getting that contract."

"Leave it."

"Why?" Logan pocketed the document anyway.

"You may not like this, but it's the only way. Help me get them into the car."

As they struggled with the unconscious men, Logan said, "What are we doing?"

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"Taking them to the lake."

It became clear. "We can't do that."

"We can't do anything else. What happens when they wake up?"

Casey considered. "I'll have to run."

"And keep running. Forever. While the ATA with all its resources tracks you down. I give you six months. Meanwhile, Bernice would be back here alone and unmarried, having your baby."

"Why does everybody else always have the winning argument?" Logan heaved heavy legs across the back seat.

"Get in," Foy said, climbing behind the wheel and switching on. "You're about to win this one."

The drive to Three Mile Lake took only ten minutes along the deserted lane. The lake was not three miles from anywhere. Its name came from the local legend that it was three miles deep. They got out and locked the car doors on the unconscious occupants. Logan began to say, "Clem, this is—"

"Shut up. Don't think about it. Help me push."

The car rolled easily to the rocky shoreline, teetered for a couple of seconds, then fell forward into black water. For a minute or so it remained floating, front-end down, the polished roof presenting a reflection of the pale sky. Then, bubbles gurgling to the surface, it nosed gently down under.

"Never to be seen again," Foy said.

"There are bound to be investigations."

"Not necessarily. Those guys are so secret I'll bet even their bosses aren't sure where they are half the time." Foy began walking back along the lane toward the cabin. "Anyway, stop worrying about the obvious. Whatever bad thing is going to happen, you can be sure it'll take you by surprise."

In the truck on the way back to Baytown, they agreed to say nothing about the encounter with the Talent Scouts. The only people who knew the Scouts were trying to sign him were his mother, his sister, and Bernice Howard. "I'll tell them I couldn't stand the cabin, so I decided to come back," Logan said. "I'll say if the Scouts show up, I'll refuse to sign."

"And they won't and it'll all be forgotten." Foy rolled to a stop outside the Logan house. "If ATA does send somebody else, we'll hide you. We did it once, we can do it again."

Logan found his mother and sister in the kitchen. They were

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surprised and relieved to see him, to know he was all right. "We thought you'd be on your way to the States by now."

"Why did you think that?"

"Because the Scouts were on their way to Foy's cabin."

"Who said?"

"Bernice. She was here an hour ago. She said Clement Foy told her they'd discovered where you were hiding and they'd gone to collect you."

Logan turned and headed back to the front door. "That explains one thing anyway."

"Where are you going?"

"I won't be long. I'll tell you when I get back."

He walked to Bernice's house at the foot of the hill near the canning factory. There was a light in the window. She'd be waiting to hear how the situation had worked out. She opened the door moments after his knock. "Casey—"

He walked past her into the sitting room, and took his familiar place at the end of the sofa. His fingertips knew every worn thread on that upholstered arm. "Why did you do it, Bernice?"

"I don't know what—"

"Come on. You told my mother Clem said the Scouts had found where I was hiding. Wrong. Clem told *you* and *you* told the Scouts. Does a plush life mean that much to you?"

She sat on the edge of a chair, her arms folded, her chin high. "We could have everything in the Pleasure Dome."

"Do you really think those people have everything? The same streets, the same rooms. The same companions for a lifetime—They're in jail."

"Some jail. Have you seen their cars, the way they dress?" She searched his eyes. "Where did they go?"

"The Scouts? I convinced them I'd never sign. They drove away."

"I don't believe that."

"Believe what you like." He got up. "You should have talked to me before sending them, love. We're supposed to share things, and that includes decisions about our future." He moved past her to the door. "I'm tired all of a sudden. We'll talk tomorrow."

"You've *never* cared about what *I* want."

"You want a baby. I care about that."

She found whatever it was in his eyes that she was looking for. "Oh, that. I meant to tell you, my period came a long time ago. I guess I was never really pregnant in the first place."

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Logan walked home slowly. So now he was entirely free. But it didn't feel good. He felt as if something very valuable had been torn from his mind, leaving a bleeding patch that would be a long time healing over. What could he do now?

His hand went to his inside pocket and touched the folded contract. All right, why not? He would report to the Pleasure Dome, show the signed document, and they would let him in. Such action would prevent any suspicion over the missing Talent Scouts falling on him or on his friend, Clement Foy.

Logan's pace quickened. Yes, this was the way. His career would take off, his face would appear on cinema screens and on television, his songs would flood the airwaves. He would be seen reveling in the hollow, hilarious life with the prettiest girls in the world.

And every few months he would send a postcard to Bernice.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

Luckily, no neighbor children had invaded the garden and eaten the berries. She had taken the caution to warn some of her adjacent neighbors the berries were dangerous. It didn't matter to the neighbors one way or another, especially the women, who treated Mary as though she came from outer space, let alone the Deep South.

In this eleventh short story, George Baxt again perpetrates his wonderfully wicked way with words, his wonderful, witty way with a dark tale . . .

MARY, MARY, QUITE CONTRARY

by GEORGE BAXT

After a restless, sleepless night, Mary Langtry got out of bed, put on a robe, and went to the kitchen where she got the coffee going. While the electric percolator chugged away, she went outside into her small, well kept garden at the rear of the cottage. She yawned and stretched her arms while staring at the sky, where the first light of dawn seemed to be having a struggle establishing itself. She wondered if today would be another scorcher. It was only mid-June and already the kind of hot uncomfortable weather that belonged to August. There was rarely weather like this where she came from. Where ah all comes from, she told herself in a southern accent.

Mr. Milkin, her boss, owner of the K-Zee Coffee Shoppe in the West Thirties off Seventh Avenue where Mary worked as a counter waitress, frequently commented, "Where did you get that accent?

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It's like no accent *I* ever heard Down South." During the war, Mr. Milkin had been stationed at an assortment of installations and camps in an assortment of southern states—always a cook but never a hero. And Mary continued to explain patiently, "I been talkin' this h'yeah way since I was a toddlah."

Lulu Dobson, Mary's friend and co-worker wisecracked, "That accent's straight out of *Gone With the Wind.*" They had met three years earlier when Mary first arrived in New York, alone, friendless, and with no prospects. The girls struck up a conversation while standing in line to see a hit movie, and after the movie, over coffee, Lulu learned that Mary was perilously short of funds and in need of a job.

"Ever sling hash?" she asked Mary, who was hungrily slicing into a very damp melted cheese sandwich, her left hand holding the fork that she was swiftly piloting into her mouth.

"Suh-ling hay-ash?" she asked.

"Waitress," said Lulu, pouring sugar into her coffee. "That's what I do. Base pay is union and the tips are good." She described the K-Zee Shoppe's location in the heart of the garment center, where the tips were abnormally generous.

"It wouldn't take me long to get the hang of it, do you think, love?"

"Love?" asked Lulu.

"Yes," said Mary with a warm smile. "Love. That's a term of endearment where ah comes from. My mammy and my pappy always called each other and everybody else 'love.' It's just an old habit."

"It's kind of nice," said Lulu. "I like it. Anyway, you look like you've got strong hands, I'm sure you can juggle dishes along with the best of us. The trick is to see if Milkin—that's the boss's name—is in the market for extra help."

As luck had it, Mr. Milkin *was* in the market for extra help, mostly because he was in the market for Mary. Mary was a handsome woman, though to Lulu it was obvious her hair was too heavily henna'd and her eye makeup was just a shade overdone. But Mary's figure was good and her legs were shapely and strong and in just a few days she was slinging hash like an expert.

She continued living at the Y.W.C.A. until Lulu told her about a bungalow that had become vacant down the street from where she lived with her mother in Canarsie.

"Canarsie? Where's Canarsie?" Mary's face was screwed up like a child having difficulty making a candy purchase.

Lulu laughed. "It's the tip of Brooklyn, honey, on Jamaica Bay.

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I've lived there since I was a kid. Mom and I have been together in the house for over five years now. We lost Dad six years ago and five years ago was when my rotten boy friend went back to his wife. So I moved back home because it was cheaper that way. Listen, come on home with me tonight after work. You can look at the bungalow and see if it suits you. It's on a not very nice street, but it's quiet."

"Does it have a garden?" The question was put softly, almost wistfully.

"Well, now," said Lulu, "I don't really know. It has a back yard and I suppose if you've got a green thumb you could fix it up real pretty." Then, as an afterthought: "You like gardening?"

"I love it," said Mary with a passion Lulu privately thought should be reserved for a lover, not a hobby. "I love growing things. I love pretty colors and eating my own vegetables."

That was three years ago and now Mary was in her garden examining the bush that had reached its full maturity of three feet. Its bell-shaped flowers were in full blossom, flowers of alternating blue-purple and dull red. Soon the berries would appear. Very black berries. Very lethal. Some unfortunate birds would peck at them and die and Mary would give them a haphazard interment in the garbage pail as she did with the birds of the previous two summers. Luckily, no neighbor children had invaded the garden and eaten the berries. She had taken the caution to warn some of her adjacent neighbors that the berries were dangerous.

It didn't matter to the neighbors one way or another, especially the women, who treated Mary as though she came from outer space, let alone the Deep South. Even Lulu had become somewhat remote and distant now that she had taken up with a new lover. That was fine by Mary. She treasured her privacy, and Lulu and her mother had had a habit, when Mary first moved into the bungalow, of dropping in on her unexpected and unannounced. Mary didn't like that. Soon they learned to phone first or wait for an invitation. Then after a while they ceased phoning and Mary rarely invited.

"Doesn't she have any men friends at *all?*" Mrs. Dobson asked Lulu shortly after Mary took possession of the bungalow.

"She could have plenty," said Lulu between sips of scalding coffee, "but she turns them all off. Even poor old Mr. Milkin's stopped pinching her backside. You know what, Ma, I think he's afraid of her."

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"Oh, go on—not Milkin."

"Yes, he is. He says she said to him once through very narrow slitted eyes, 'Do that again, Mr. Milkin, and you'll lose those fingers.' "

"Oh, go on!"

"I swear on Poppa's grave."

Mrs. Dobson shook her head solemnly while contemplating Mary's celibacy. Then she inquired of her daughter gravely, "She's not queer or anything, is she?"

"Well, I've seen no signs," said Lulu with an authority she usually reserved for cab drivers. "It isn't a matter of her not liking men. She just doesn't like *anybody*."

Mrs. Dobson folded her arms and leaned back. "She doesn't get any mail from Down South."

"How do you know that?"

"The mailman told me. He was in for a cup of coffee and we got to discussing Mary because he's interested in her and he told me she doesn't get anything but junk mail."

"How about that."

Now Mrs. Dobson was leaning forward conspiratorially. "Lulu—is it my imagination or is that accent of hers getting thicker?"

"Mama, I was wondering the same thing myself." Lulu sighed. "Yes, indeed, she's a very peculiar person. Still, she calls everybody 'love.'"

"But very insincerely, I'm sure," said Mrs. Dobson with a sniff as she helped herself to a third English muffin.

Now, three years later, Lulu was determined to get chummy with Mary again. The decision was due to no pressing urge of hers to revive the friendship—it had been pressed on her by Nick Abrams, one of the steady customers at the K-Zee Coffee Shoppe. Nick was a writer who lived in a reconverted loft just a few doors down from K-Zee. Nick's friend, Don Borelli, was Lulu's new lover. Nick had brought Don into the place for lunch and, as Don later explained to Lulu, "You bent over to serve me a salad and it was love at first sight." Lulu almost cried because Don had been trying to make time with Mary and of course was getting nowhere. Now it was Nick's turn to suffer that frustration.

"She's such a cold fish," Lulu insisted to Nick, "why bother?"

"I like a challenge. She fascinates me. Women of mystery always fascinate me."

"Oh go on," said Lulu with a disdainful wave of her hand. The

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only mystery she could see about Mary was why men were so interested in her.

And then one day came the dawn, and Lulu realized it was the mystery of unavailability that made Mary so desirable. Lulu herself had no patience with mystery and unavailability. Her hunger for men was earthy and honest.

Nick's pursuit of Mary never flagged. Every lunch hour he sat at her section of the counter, his eyes following her every move. His lunch diet never varied—a bowl of fresh fruit topped by a generous helping of cottage cheese. He flirted outrageously, but Mary never lost her cool. He tried to pique in her some interest in his writing, but she continued to reward him with a blank look and dull eyes. "I've got a very interesting new assignment," he told her one day between mouthfuls of cottage cheese as she was clearing dirty dishes from the counter. "I'm doing a series of articles on women killers." He winked at her. "Not people who *kill* women, but women who have killed. Are you interested in that sort of thing?"

"I like a good murder story sometimes."

"You mean you like to read them?"

"Sometimes I like to read them."

"I have a fine shelf of murder books up in the loft. Why don't you come up sometime and choose a few?"

"There's a bigger selection at the public library."

She walked away from him briskly with an armload of dirty dishes. Milkin, who had been watching them, said to Mary as she was about to enter the kitchen, "Can't you be a little nicer to the customers?"

Mary nailed his face with her eyes. "Do I do a good job?"

"Yes, Mary, you do a good job."

"Have I ever insulted a customer?"

"Never."

"Do I earn my money?"

Milkin shrugged. He knew when he was beaten. The uncertain smile on his face was all the answer Mary needed and she continued into the kitchen. Milkin walked down the aisle behind the counter until he reached Nick, whom he liked. "Nick baby," he said, "why do you waste your time?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mary. Why do you bother? In your line, you must meet plenty of interesting ladies who don't give you a hard time. Why do you bother?"

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"It's hurting you?"

"No. I just hope it isn't hurting you."

"It's not hurting me. I'm enjoying it. Today I'm getting someplace." He smiled. "She spoke three sentences to me."

"Well, how about that," said Milkin.

After lunch, Nick went to the main branch of the public library to research his series of articles on women murderers. He'd been at it for weeks but he hadn't uncovered anything new or fascinating in the way of murderesses. Lizzie Borden, Winnie Ruth Judd, Ruth Snyder were all tried and trite. Mrs. Jacobs, an assistant librarian, was sympathetic to Nick's problem. "We have an excellent collection of foreign murderesses."

"They've been done to death, too," countered Nick, adding with a pixie grin, "no pun intended."

"No pun *detected,*" said Mrs. Jacobs. "You just haven't been probing in the right places, Mr. Abrams. You've been digging around in the old files. Why don't you try some of the new files? We've some very interesting new material on a British murder case that shocked the English some three or four years ago. The murderer was never apprehended. It's a fascinating story. Come have a look."

The following Friday Lulu saw to it that she left the K-Zee with Mary and walked with her to Fifth Avenue, where they would get the bus to Canarsie. "Mary," said Lulu as they stood in line waiting to board the bus, "Mom and I miss the old closeness. I mean, we don't seem to see anything of you any more."

"I know," said Mary, pronouncing "know" so that it emerged "nay-ow." "It's all my fault. But you've been so busy with your boy friend—"

"Isn't Don cute?" Mary managed a smile. "I mean I know you showed him the back of your head when he tried to make time with you but, really, he's terrific."

"How come you're not out with him tonight?"

"He's helping Nick with his research. O.K., all right, now how come you don't like Nick?"

"I'm just not interested in getting involved with anybody."

"Nick isn't *anybody*. He's a *writer.*"

"Big deal." *Bee-egg dee-yall.*

"He's doing this story on lady murderers—"

"He told me."

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"That's right. He *said* he told you. Well, he's come across this case that nobody in this country has ever written about—" Mary was staring out the window "—this woman in England who was suspected of murdering her entire family. She poisoned them all with some kind of fruit. Can you imagine?"

Mary continued looking out the window.

"She murdered her husband and his mother and father and her *own* mother and father and her two sisters and both her brothers-in-law."

"Quite a haul," Mary said.

"And she got away with it! I mean she went on trial and everything like that and they couldn't prove she did it. Even though she was growing the poison berry bushes in her own garden, they couldn't prove a thing. And now she's disappeared without a trace. Nick said one of the articles he read in a British newspaper suggested she might have gone to Australia to continue her acting."

"She was an actress?" Mary's voice was dull and flat.

"An amateur actress. You know—local stuff. But the funny thing is, she'd made a big hit in some play about a Scottish poisoner named Madeline something who had poisoned her kid brother and got away with it, and they think it was this play that inspired her to do away with her family." Lulu sighed. "I don't tell it too good. When Nick tells it, I get goose pimples. Nick told me to tell you. He thought you'd be fascinated with the story."

Mary turned to Lulu, who was rummaging in her handbag. "Why would the story fascinate me?"

"Well, you being a gardener and all that." Lulu found her makeup and was lavishly rouging her lips. "I told him about how those berries you grew killed those poor little birds—"

"Making *me* a murderer too."

Lulu looked up and was surprised to see that Mary was smiling. "Oh no! Come on! I mean, like I told Nick about all the pretty things you grow besides the vegetables you eat and that the berry bush was the prettiest of all. I mean, you still grow that bush, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, thanks for reminding me. The berries are out. I must pick them and throw them away."

"Listen, Mary, I hope you don't think I'm getting out of line when I tell you this, but Nick's really got a case on you."

Mary echoed softly, "Nick's got a case on me."

"He and Don are coming out to dinner here with Mom and me

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tomorrow night. Why don't you join us?" Mary was staring out the window again. "I'll make him promise to behave."

"Oh, he always behaves."

"Well, you know what I mean. Not push too hard, that sort of thing. He's going to tell Mom all about this murderess. Now what was her name again?" Mary started to speak, but Lulu beat her to it. "Nancy Perkins, that was her name. I remember—they called her the bella-donna killer. And those berries were filled with arsenic or something like that." She fell silent and hummed under her breath for a few moments, then she resumed speaking. "Can you imagine anybody killing so much family?"

"They must gave gotten on her nerves."

"The story hints she was in love with someone the family didn't like. I mean, she'd been cheating on her husband with just about everybody in the amateur acting company, and there was this guy—a butcher, I think—she was planning to run off with, but the husband was tipped off by a jealous woman and so he and the brothers-in-law got rid of him. I think he just sort of disappeared."

Mary coughed, reached into her handbag, found a handkerchief, and blew her nose. Lulu stared at her. "You catching a cold or something?"

When Lulu got home, she said to her mother, "You'll never believe this! You'll absolutely never believe this!"

Mrs. Dobson's eyes widened with joy as she clasped her hands together. "Don's asked you to marry him!"

"Oh, no—nothing like that. Mary's coming to dinner tomorrow."

Mrs. Dobson sat down. "I don't believe it."

"She is. And what's more, she said don't worry about dessert. She's going to bake something special. A real old-fashioned Down South pie filled with all sorts of fruits."

"Well, won't that be nice. I'm real glad she's coming, I really am. You say this Nick is sweet on her? Well, maybe she's loosening up at last. I mean, my God, living alone all these years without any companionship at all. I'm really glad she's coming. Now I know it'll be a real bang-up dinner."

In her garden, Mary was collecting berries into a mason jar. Softly she sang to herself, "Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow—" Then she chuckled and whispered to herself, "Why honeychile, it grows real useful, that's hay-ow it grows . . ."

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

CAIN: While we await Diane Johnson's big biography of Dashiell Hammett, due later this year, let's take a look at another big one: *Cain* by Roy Hoopes (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $25.00). This 684-page biography of James M. Cain is the work of a Washington journalist who interviewed Cain and became friendly with him during the last two years of his life. In 1981 Hoopes edited *The Baby in the Icebox,* a collection of Cain's stories and sketches, and now he's followed that up with a truly massive biography of the man who brought his own brand of tough realism to the pages of *The Postman Always Rings Twice, Double Idemnity, Mildred Pierce,* and a dozen other lesser-known novels. It will probably stand as the definitive account of Cain's life and work.

The book is so detailed—including even a description of a prep-school football game taken from Cain's unpublished memoirs of his youth—that the casual reader is apt to grow restive. But Hoopes' painstaking research makes it a must for anyone interested in Cain and the writing of his period. Best of all, the book offers a fascinating examination of the ebb and flow of an author's reputation, with Cain's writing-income plunging from $80,000 in 1944 to only $2,000 by 1961. A revival and another decline were to follow before James M. Cain died in 1977 at the age of eighty-five.

ANNIVERSARY: Though it occurred some months back, mention should be made of the tenth anniversary of Murder Ink, New York City's original mystery bookstore, located at 271 West 87th Street. The founding of Murder Ink by Dilys Winn in the summer of 1972 heralded a new era of the specialty bookshop, and mystery bookstores quickly sprang up in cities across the country. Purchased in 1976 by its present owner, Carol Brener, Murder Ink has doubled its size and continues to thrive. It's now one of three mystery bookstores in New York City alone, and by some estimates as many as seventy-five may exist worldwide.

CONAN DOYLE SHORT STORIES: There's been renewed inter-

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est recently in the non-Sherlockian short stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The Dial Press has published *Masterworks of Crime & Mystery*, a collection of fifteen Doyle stories, 1879–1898, edited by Jack Tracy. And in England, Secker & Warburg has published Doyle's *Uncollected Stories*, containing thirty-three tales from forgotten magazines, uncovered by John Michael Gibson and Richard Lancelyn Green while they were compiling a complete Doyle bibliography. Included are ten stories never previously identified as the work of Doyle.

BOUCHERCON XIV: Planning is under way for Bouchercon XIV, to be held in New York City this October under the direction of Chris Steinbrunner and Otto Penzler. One of the innovations being considered is a group of awards along the lines of the Hugos given out by science-fiction fans at their world convention. Winners in the various categories would be voted on by those attending the Bouchercon.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: EQMM regular Clark Howard has a new fact-crime book coming from St. Martin's/Marek this month. Titled *Brothers in Blood,* it tells of a bloody massacre in 1973, when three urban brothers killed six members of a rural Georgia family, which also included three brothers.

Bill Pronzini and Marcia Muller are editing an anthology of suspense stories by women writers titled *The Web She Weaves.* It'll be published later this year by William Morrow. On his own, Pronzini is also editing *The Arbor House Treasury of Great Pulp Detective Stories.*

A deluxe edition of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* will be published this spring by The Arion Press, 566 Commercial Street, San Francisco, CA 94111. The illustrated edition, limited to about 300 copies, is priced at $325.00.

My fellow columnist Jon L. Breen is preparing an annotated bibliography of courtroom fiction, to be published by Scarecrow Press. He'd appreciate hearing from knowledgeable readers, who can write him in care of this magazine.

John le Carré's new novel, *The Little Drummer Girl,* is due from Alfred A. Knopf this spring.

CORRECTION: The Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Sources is being edited by Walter Albert. My item in the November issue credited Guy M. Townsend, who is actually the publisher. His press, Brownstone Books, hopes to bring out the new reference volume late this year.

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"Q"

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

"I'm a detective because I happen to like the work. It pays me a fair salary but I could find other jobs that would pay more. Liking work makes you want to do it . . . That's the fix I'm in. I don't know anything else, don't enjoy anything else, don't want to know or enjoy anything else." The words of Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op are a spoken mirror of the author himself in a recent hour-long documentary on the great American mystery writer carefully constructed for air on Public Television stations. *The Case of Dashiell Hammett* is both a loving tribute and a perceptive screen biography. It will hopefully be played on television for some time to come, and deserves repeated viewing.

The program was written and produced by the award-winning Stephen Talbot, a columnist on foreign affairs for *The Nation* whose previous television reports have been on topics like nuclear weapons and racism, but who has not concealed his affection for detective fiction and especially the works of Hammett—who, Talbot says, "created characters who reach out of the page and grab you by the throat, characters who reverberate in your dreams, who have become part of the American mythology." Talbot assembles an incredible array of rare photos, newsreels, and film clips to illustrate this hard new literature whose heroes were ordinary men doggedly pursuing truth in a dark and sordid netherworld.

His insights are adulatory: "Hammett forged the image of the urban American detective—callous, aggressive, sarcastic, tough but honest, now as deeply ingrained in our popular culture as the cowboy." He reinforces this image with scenes from films drawn from Hammett's work, such as when Bogart playing Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* snarls: "Don't be too sure I'm as crooked as I'm supposed to be." He also uses Hammett's own words lifted from the pages of the pulps (and read by the producer's father, character actor Lyle Talbot, veteran of a mob of Thirties' crime films). Check out the deadly flippancy of the Continental Op as he waves us farewell: "I'm going calling now on Chinatown. If you don't hear from me for a couple of days, will you ask the streetcleaners to watch what they're sweeping up?"

Talbot also presents commentary from contemporary writers like Joe Gores, Lillian Hellman, and biographer Diane Johnson. They discuss Hammett the man, a real-life detective before writing best-sellers, a flamboyant partygoer and as well a recluse who stopped writing at the height of his success—a somewhat indecipherable personality, a "Shadow Man,"

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to give new meaning to the stalking term used in the detective profession. Hammett's political troubles are given their due, but not at the expense of his creativity—from his first book, the gritty *Red Harvest,* to his fifth and last book, the much lighter *The Thin Man,* from the Op to Sam Spade to Nick Charles.

We get to know these heroes as Hammett sees them: the Op "a little man going forward day after day through mud and blood and death and deceit, as callous and brutal and cynical as necessary," Spade not "an erudite solver of riddles in the Sherlock Holmes manner" but "a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent bystander or client," the sophisticated Charles, a retired detective who prefers drinking to work—significantly Hammett's final creation.

We visit Hammett locales from foggy San Francisco to dying mill towns, follow his career from lean days at *Black Mask* magazine to lavish nights in Hollywood as a scriptwriter, and finally to the political activism which brought him a six-month prison term and literary disfavor.

This intriguing man and giant writer—*mystery* writer—is presented to us in full detail in an outstanding documentary. "Hammett was an original," Talbot reminds us, and perhaps we need reminding of Dashiell Hammett's full contribution to our genre. "He wrote like no one before him ever dared. He established a new authentic voice in American literature: the hard-boiled detective story with its clean spare prose, bare-knuckled impact, and dark stoic vision of the lone private eye doing his job, sticking to his private code of ethics in a violent, corrupt world."

Listen. When a man's partner is killed, he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you're suppose to do something about it. . .

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INTERVIEW: LILLIAN DE LA TORRE (2)

This is the conclusion of an interview that began in the previous issue.

EQMN: Is it true that your work wasn't published until you were forty—and that your husband (English professor George McCue, now retired) thought detective stories were worthless?

DE LA TORRE: Yes twice—and the two answers make one story.

I decided to be a writer in that magic year when I was nine, and have never stopped writing since.

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But I was my own critic, and for years I offered nothing for publication because I perceived that I had nothing to say. Not until I found the field that I could mark out for mine did I begin to write for publication. And that happened because one day I got into an argument with my husband the Professor, who, as you say, was denigrating detective stories. Just as I was proclaiming that it was the great character that makes the great detective story, it flashed on me that my favorite great character of all time, Dr. Sam: Johnson, the Great Cham of literature, was uniquely fitted to detect crime and chicane. And moreover he came equipped with his "Boswell," the only original Boswell, to record his doings. As "Dr. Sam: Johnson, Detector," he has been flourishing ever since.

I won that argument, didn't I?

EQMN: In 1945 you acted as a technical advisor at Twentieth Century-Fox. Was this for a specific movie?

DE LA TORRE: Yes, it was. My first true-crime book was *Elizabeth Is Missing,* a tale of kidnaping and bawdry on the seamy side of London in 1752. When young director Joseph L. Mankiewicz read it, he sent for me in a hurry. "I want to do a remake of *Berkeley Square,*" he said. "You remember how at the climax of the play the time-traveler looks out on the Square and exclaims in disgust, 'God, how the Eighteenth Century stinks!' You're here to put in the stinks." He handed me a draft of his script, and I put in the stinks.

Joe never did remake *Berkeley Square,* which is a pity, for he had a wonderful gimmick for giving new life to that old chestnut. But the studio had other ideas. He made *Cleopatra* instead.

EQMN: You've written nine plays, all produced and several published.

DE LA TORRE: There's nothing like writing words to be spoken to teach you to write vividly, succinctly, and with point. And when you're writing words for *yourself* to speak—as I did in *Goodbye, Miss Lizzie Borden,* in which I created the part of Lizzie, and in others of my crime thrillers—you learn in a hurry.

EQMN: Goodbye, Miss Lizzie Borden was televised for a 1955 *Alfred Hitchcock Presents.* Who do *you* think committed the Borden murders?

DE LA TORRE: In *Goodbye, Miss Lizzie Borden,* of course, Lizzie didn't do it, but she knew who did, which is the most interesting way to view her. But I never quite believed my own theory. What about her attempt to buy poison? —In 1961, Ed Radin's new solution struck me as compelling in many ways. But the biggest stumbling block to practically any theory is that quiet ninety-minute wait between the murderous frenzy that battered Mrs. Borden and the murderous frenzy that chopped down Mr. Borden. How could anybody stay on the boil that long and not show it? Therefore I have hailed with delight Mary Smith's brilliant solution in *The Armchair Detective,* which gives us only *one*

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murderous frenzy. It's my kind of solution, such as I outlined in *The Heir of Douglas*—down the middle.

EQMN: What is Mary Smith's solution?

DE LA TORRE: No, no, go read *The Armchair Detective.*

EQMN: Do you have any comment on what you've referred to as the WEdunit?

DE LA TORRE: The WEdunit —that is, the book exposing public misconduct and injustice—plays a very important part in the moral life of a nation. I need only instance Zola's *J'Accuse.* By its very nature, it is seldom or never a detective story.

EQMN: How did your juvenile book, *The Actress* (Nelson, 1954), come to be written?

DE LA TORRE: I wrote two juveniles for Elizabeth Tompkins at Nelson. The first, *The White Rose of Stuart,* came about because I had written a Dr. Sam: Johnson story featuring Bonnie Prince Charlie. Called on for a second one, I chose for my subject Sarah Siddons, who had been a strolling player in her childhood and rose to become perhaps the greatest actress of all time.

As one who first appeared before the footlights at the age of nine, and kept it up off and on all my life, I thought I could convey what it felt like to be an actress—and research taught me to know the stage technicalities of yesterday as experience had taught me those of today.

EQMN: And your cookbooks with Carol Truax?

DE LA TORRE: Carol Truax became my friend when she directed me in several amateur performances. One vacation-time we spent two weeks together and cooked up a storm. We became so enamored of each other's delectable recipes, and the speed with which we turned them out, that we thought the world ought to have the benefit of our experience, so we collaborated on *The 60 Minute Chef.*

EQMN: You were a member of the Mystery Writers of America's committees to select the best fact-crime book of 1973, 1974, and 1975. What did you look for in the books you read?

DE LA TORRE: Diligence in fact-collecting, sharp thinking in interpretation, humaneness in understanding, distinction in the writing, and, where possible, a striking solution.

EQMN: In the MWA Annual of 1979, the year you took on the presidency of the organization, you wrote: "It seems to me the mystery story fulfills some of the most fundamental urges of man." Comment?

DE LA TORRE: Yes, the mystery story appeals to man's deepest urges, both ignoble and noble—his base love of sensation, which catchpenny writers pander to with excessive sex and violence, and his lofty intellectual curiosity, which is avid for answers, loves a puzzle, and probes the stars.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Edward D. Hoch's annual collection of top crime fiction has a new publisher and a new (and perhaps more accurate) title, but happily *The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories 1982* (Walker, $12.95) is basically no different from the long-running *Best Detective Stories of the Year*. If anything, this is an even stronger collection than usual and one with a greater proportion of big-name contributors, among them Ursula Curtiss, Brian Garfield, and Donald E. Westlake (with a rare short story about comic thief Dortmunder). Of the fifteen stories, seven come from *EQMM*, two from *AHMM*, one from *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine*, two from *Playboy*, one from *Cosmopolitan*, and two (a fine pair by Jonathan Gash and Michael Gilbert) from British anthologies not published in the United States. Hoch continues the valuable Yearbook section, a new feature of which is Martin H. Greenberg's listing of the best novels of 1981.

**** P. D. James: *The Skull Beneath the Skin*, Scribners, $13.95. Following her venture into the mainstream with *Innocent Blood*, James returns to as conventional a detective-story situation as could be imagined: a house party convened at an island castle for a semi-pro production of *The Duchess of Malfi* of which the lead actress, as poisonous a figure as she usually is in mystery fiction, is the target of death threats. Private detective Cordelia Gray (last seen in the memorable *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*) is hired to protect her. (Adam Dalgliesh is alluded to but never appears.) James plots, writes, and draws characters so brilliantly that she can get away with an extremely leisurely pace and not-quite-excessive background detail. The action finale is harrowing and the solution satisfactory if not classically tidy.

**** Bill Pronzini: *Dragonfire*, St. Martin's, $10.95. The latest Nameless detective novel finds the pulp-collecting private eye at his lowest ebb: his license suspended, his romance with Kerry Wade on shaky ground, and his friend Lt. Eberhardt put in a coma by an attack from a Chinese hit man. The San Francisco background is more vivid than ever, especially the picture of Chinatown's underworld. Though the plotting stunts of recent Pronzini novels are absent here, the regular reader's involvement with Nameless and his problems continues to increase in intensity, making the book succeed on an emotional level rare in the field.

*** Ted Allbeury: *Shadow of Shadows*, Scribners, $12.95. One of the more highly touted current writers of spy novels combines the fictional story of a defected Russian

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agent who stops talking (and the British agent assigned to find out why) with the real-life story of George Blake. This is a solid job of storytelling and another in which the people involved carry more of the load than the plot complications.

*** Gordon DeMarco: *The Canvas Prison,* Germinal Press, 209 Prospect, San Francisco, CA 94110, $5.00. In his second case, private eye Riley Kovachs attempts to rescue actress Frances Farmer from a mental asylum. The time is the late Forties, at the height of the Hollywood witch hunt. This thriller, which only becomes a polemic in the final pages, is not for every taste. But if you enjoy the slang-slinging style of Robert Leslie Bellem (I do) and don't mind a strong dose of left-wing politics mixed in with the plot and action (I don't), you will find this case enjoyable reading.

*** Joseph Hansen: *Backtrack,* Foul Play/Countryman, $12.95. One of the genre's finest stylists presents the story of a teenage boy who hitchhikes to Hollywood for his actor-father's funeral and stays to seek the secret of his supposed suicide by falling. This is less a conventional detective story and even more steeped in a homosexual milieu than Hansen's novels about Dave Brandstetter.

*** Michael Kenyon: *Man at the Wheel,* Doubleday/Crime Club, $11.95. Arkansas preacher Jody C. James, touring Britain with his staff and troupe of singers, is recognized by journalist Peter Ramsden for an activity far removed from evangelism. Stylistically reminiscent in its best moments of Colin Watson's work, this slapstick thriller is more notable for its lampoon of hypocritical fundamentalism than for its rather thin and repetitious plot. The shock ending is as unexpected as it is odd. Series Yard man Henry Peckover alternates the narrating chores with Ramsden.

** Marvin Kaye: *The Soap Opera Slaughters,* Doubleday/Crime Club, $11.95. Public relations woman Hilary Quayle, the least likeable series sleuth this side of Chief Inspector Dover, is hard as ever to warm up to, and narrator Gene is still too much of a road company Archie Goodwin. The puzzle is pretty good (and well clued), and the background of soap opera production is the book's strongest feature.

All of August Derleth's tales about Solar Pons, the Sherlock Holmes of Praed Street, have now been brought together in two slip-cased volumes totaling over 1300 pages. *The Solar Pons Omnibus* (Arkham House, $39.95) rearranges the cases (69 short stories and one novel) in order of their occurrence. Robert Bloch has written a fine Foreword and Basil Copper, who took over the Pons series after Derleth's death, has edited out the Americanisms, over the objections of some Pontine scholars. Probably no one in literary history could match Derleth for both volume and versatility, and this set displays one small but well loved corner of his output.

Another notable reprint is Cor-

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nell Woolrich's *Black Alibi* (Ballantine, $2.25), a beautifully written 1942 novel concerning an escaped jaguar in a South American city and the brutal series of crimes blamed on him. Francis M. Nevins, Jr. provides an Introduction, mostly identical to others in this reprint series but with three informative paragraphs about the novel, its pulp origins, and subsequent media adaptations.

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DETECTIVERSE

THE ETHNIC DETECTIVE

by S. L. VARNADO

The British sleuth is urbane,
He works without sweat or strain.
The villains may flee, but he won't miss his tea—
He's really quite sober and sane.

The French detective has flair,
And a touch of savoir faire.
Between absinthe and brandy, and champagne—if handy—
Each case has a certain air.

The American dick, by contrast,
Is a tough guy from first to last.
Urbane he is not, savoir faire he ain't got—
But he sure gets the job done fast!

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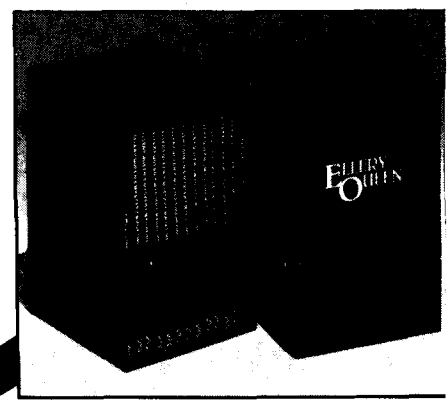

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a *NEW* A. J. Raffles story by

BARRY PEROWNE

"You're an observant man, Mr. Raffles," Sherlock Holmes said.
"A team captain in first-class cricket, Holmes," said Dr. Watson, "is alert to details. He has *to be . . . "*

RAFFLES AND AN AMERICAN NIGHT'S ENTERTAINMENT

by BARRY PEROWNE

"Pardon me, gentlemen, would either of you be Dr. Watson?"

It was the Fourth of July, and the question was asked in the course of an occasion that, described by its host as An American Night's Entertainment, was taking place on board the only authentic Mississippi River steamboat ever to be moored in the Thames estuary.

Chief attraction of the occasion was a speech by a distinguished visitor to London, Mr. Samuel L. Clemens, known worldwide as Mark Twain, author of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Life on the Mississippi.*

The great American's speech, a gem of wit and anecdote, was now over and a number of the guests present, many of them Londoners of some consequence, had come topside to take the air. It was of a midsummer mildness, the estuary tide was out, and the unclouded sky was splendid with stars. The two gentlemen who were asked if either of them was Dr. Watson wore conventional evening dress. They were standing at the rail of this upper deck. Turning, they found a steward regarding them.

"Yes," said one of the gentlemen, a man of stalwart build, square of face, with bushy, slightly greying sideburns and the look of a country squire, "I'm Dr. Watson."

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"A lady's been taken poorly, sir," said the steward. "I was sent by the Chief Steward to find you and ask if you'd oblige."

"Certainly," said Dr. Watson. "You'll excuse me, Holmes?"

"The classic appeal 'Is there a doctor in the house?' is not one to be lightly ignored," said the medical man's aquiline companion. "Carry on, Watson."

The steward led Dr. Watson through the throng of ladies and gentlemen, who, discussing Mark Twain's delightful speech, were sauntering arm-in-arm on the deck, to a pair of handsome doors that stood open to a wide staircase. Richly carpeted, it curved down into the palatial showboat's main-deck salon, where an orchestra was playing and many of the younger guests could be seen to be gracefully waltzing.

At the head of the staircase Dr. Watson was saluted respectfully by the gold-epauletted Chief Steward.

"I knew you were on board, Dr. Watson," he said, "so I took the liberty of sending for you. From my post of duty there I was watching the dancers when I noticed Miss Ann Rice, the actress, overcome by faintness. A lady and gentleman went immediately to her aid and assisted her out of the salon. They'll have taken her to one of the cabins which are used mostly as changing-rooms by musicians of the orchestra."

"Where *are* these cabins?" asked Dr. Watson.

"Follow me, sir," said his conducting steward.

He led Dr. Watson to an adjacent but smaller doorway. This gave access from the upper deck to narrow stairs, down which Dr. Watson followed the steward into a carpeted corridor where the lighting came subdued from blue-globed lamps. Coiled hoses and similar equipment for firefighting occupied shallow recesses on one side of the corridor. On the other side were six doors bearing brass numerals. Music from the salon was faintly audible.

Unseen by Dr. Watson and the steward, a man in evening dress was standing motionless, watching, in one of the firefighting recesses.

The steward knocked on four of the doors before he got a response.

"Who's there?" a man called from Cabin Four.

"Dr. Watson for you, sir," replied the steward.

"A doctor?" said the voice. "Thank God!"

A key turned audibly in the lock of Cabin Four. A man half opened the door. "Come in, Doctor," he said.

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With a nod of dismissal to the steward, who went away toward the stairs, Dr. Watson entered the cabin.

At the sight that met his eyes he stopped dead, but he saw the sight only briefly, for it vanished in a blinding flash caused by the impact of a massive object on the base of his skull.

The motionless man in the recess outside heard nothing but the music from the salon. Soundlessly, then, A. J. Raffles, gentlemen crook, stepped out into the corridor.

It was not Raffles' policy, when a guest at an important social occasion, to arrive in the company of his confederate, the journalist Manders. On the contrary, when Manders also was a guest they took care to arrive separately and to give each other a wide berth until otherwise convenient.

Currently of some celebrity as captain of the England cricket team, Raffles had no sooner set foot on Mr. Dion Delaney's much-discussed *Showboat-on-the-Thames* than he noticed that Bunny Manders was among the guests already present. Raffles also was quick to notice the lovely, auburn-haired young actress, Ann Rice, and the exceptional beauty of the emerald necklace she was wearing.

His evening dress immaculate, his keen face tanned, his dark hair crisp, Raffles kept thereafter a meditative eye on Miss Rice, and he still was doing so when, following Mark Twain's witty speech inaugurating the showboat, dancing got under way in the salon.

Smoking a cigarette as he stood watching the dancers, particularly the delectable Miss Rice, Raffles noticed the onset of her malaise.

She seemed gradually to wilt in the arms of her partner, then abruptly she freed herself from him, walked uncertainly to a red-plush banquette, and sank down upon it with a slender, lace-gloved hand to her brow.

Her partner, dismayed at having a lady almost faint in his embrace, stood irresolute, then faded away thankfully when a lady among the dancers observed Miss Rice's distress and went promptly to her aid. The observant lady had a fan. She used it to fan Miss Rice, at the same time murmuring anxiously to her. Nobody seemed to pay much attention, except for a large gentleman with well barbered silver hair, a squarecut beard, and a monocle in his left eye. Approaching the ladies on the banquette with dignity, he apparently made some sage suggestion to them, for the lady with the fan looked up at him gratefully with a nod of assent.

Together, the lady with the fan and the gentleman with the mon-

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ocle assisted Miss Rice to rise and, supporting her between them, guided her to a nearby doorway. The door closed behind them.

An interested spectator of the incident, Raffles wondered where Miss Rice and her necklace were being taken. He noticed that, beside the relevant doorway, a large ashtray stood on a small pedestal. He moved casually toward the ashtray. As he stubbed out his cigarette, the dance ended. Hopeful of a reprise, the dancers, still lightly embraced, looked expectantly toward the orchestra-dais, and Raffles took the opportunity to make use of the door through which Miss Rice had been assisted.

He found himself in the subdued blue lighting of a carpeted corridor, along which the lady and gentleman were assisting Miss Rice. They were passing a recess. The gentleman with the monocle reached into the recess and took out a small sandbag.

At this, Raffles stepped quickly into the recess himself. Motionless, he watched. The gentleman with the monocle held the sandbag slightly behind him as he helped to guide Miss Rice into what evidently was a cabin. The door closed and—audible through the sound of music starting again in the salon—a key was turned in the lock.

From the recess where he was standing concealed, Raffles moved quickly to the locked door, which bore the brass numeral *4*, and put an ear to the panel. He heard movements in the cabin. Something was going on in there. He put an eye to the keyhole, but the key was in the lock. He could see nothing.

He was about to listen again at the panel when he heard footsteps approaching down a narrow staircase at the end of the corridor. He stepped swiftly back into concealment in a recess.

Down the staircase came a steward followed by a stalwart man with bushy, slightly greying sideburns. The steward knocked at four of the doors before he got a response. . .

"A doctor? Thank God!" The door was unlocked and half opened. "Come in, Doctor." Dr. Watson entered the cabin.

The steward walked back toward the stairs as the cabin door was closed and relocked. Raffles heard nothing but the music from the salon. The steward gone, he again stepped out from his recess—only to step back into it as he heard the door of Cabin Four unlocked. The silver-bearded gentleman came out, transferred the key from the inside of the lock to the outside, and relocked the door. Pocketing the key, he took his monocle from a pocket of his white vest and adjusted it to his right eye—the monocle he had previously worn on

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his left eye. He walked with dignity along the corridor and, letting in a brief blast of louder music, entered the salon.

Raffles moved at once to the door of Cabin Four and put an ear to the panel. He could hear only the faint music. He put an eye to the keyhole of the cabin door. With the key now gone, he could see a bulkhead bracket-lamp burning serenely. He could see nothing else. He took from the pocket of his tailcoat a small implement, a picklock, and with this he very gently manipulated the lock. The wards turned. He waited tensely for a moment, listening, but no sound came from in the cabin. He turned the doorknob with the edge of his hand and eased the door ajar. Still no sound from within. He pushed the door wider open.

At the sight that met his eyes, he stood for a moment stockstill, then he drew the door soundlessly shut and relocked it with his gadget. He walked back along the corridor and entered the salon. His air casual but his grey eyes alert, he saw at once the man he was after. That dignified gentleman was skirting the perimeter of the dance-floor, where the dance had just ended and gentlemen were escorting ladies to the banquettes that ringed the floor.

Raffles saw Manders thus escorting a lady. Noting that Manders had an eye on him, Raffles put a hand to the back of his head and patted it thrice—a signal to the elegant Manders to follow but keep his distance.

The man Raffles was after was making for the salon's exit to the main deck, for'ard. Raffles continued casually to follow. He knew what the man with the monocle had done in Cabin Four in order to steal Ann Rice's emerald necklace from her throat.

A sudden shout attracted the attention of Sherlock Holmes as, standing at the rail of the showboat's topside deck, he waited for Watson to return."Any more for the shore?" a voice shouted.

Holmes looked down over the rail. The shout had come from the coxswain of the showboat's attendant steam-pinnace, moored alongside the main deck for'ard. Having seen and heard Mark Twain, some of the guests were departing. Holmes was ready to go himself. He was only waiting for Watson.

Holmes seldom accepted invitations to social events. The reason why he had made an exception of the American Night's Entertainment was that it had enabled him to make the personal acquaintance of Mark Twain, whose work, especially *The Man That Corrupted*

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Hadleyburg, Holmes admired for its acute psychological comprehension of human nature the world over.

Leaning with his elbows on the rail, Holmes watched the departing guests step aboard the pinnace. With a toot-toot of its steam-whistle, the pinnace edged clear of the brilliantly lighted Mississippi showboat. Churning a white wake, it headed for Wapping Old Stairs, not far off the dark loom of the Thames north shore.

Mark Twain, meanwhile, was the center of a group of gentlemen, which included the U.S. ambassador, forgathered in the private sanctum of the showboat's owner, Mr. Dion Delaney, the theatrical impresario as well known in London as he was in New York and points west. It had been at St. Louis, Missouri, that Mr. Delaney had seen the showboat put up for auction. He had bid for it successfully and had had it disassembled, shipped across the Atlantic in freighters, reassembled—with embellishments—by Port of London shipwrights, and then set it afloat on the Thames.

Stout and rubicund, in his forties, Dion Delaney reckoned to make a fortune with London's first authentic showboat. But his sanctum on board here was growing hazed with smoke. The gentlemen gathered around Twain were egging him on to tell them more and more about his experiences on the far-off Mississippi.

His grizzled hair longish, his eyes amused, his lank frame at ease, his inevitable cigar drawing well, Mark Twain obliged. As the hilarity attested, he was his inimitable self. But Mr. Delaney, the host of the evening, ventured a remonstrance. "See here, gentlemen," he said, "I hate to break up this congenial group, but I've got a lot of English guests on board who'd like to be able to say they've shaken the hand that wrote *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.*"

"You're right, Delaney," said the U.S. ambassador. "We mustn't monopolize Mark—though personally I could stay here all night listening to him. There's nobody like him."

"Except maybe Sam Clemens," said Mark Twain dryly. "But don't worry—never the twain shall meet."

Amid mirth, the group broke up.

"I'd like to show you around the boat, Mark," said Delaney. "I've had a lot done to it."

"I'd like to look around," Mark Twain agreed. "It brings back old memories."

"I aim to make this showboat," said Delaney, "the top spot in

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London for dining, dancing and cabaret shows, but right now I'm preoccupied with another production—a musical, *Petticoat Lane*. I've got it in rehearsal at London's newest theatre, The Savoy, in the Strand."

"I know you have. I'm staying at the Savoy Hotel, next door to the theatre."

"I'm using Ann Rice in the lead again," said Delaney. "By gum, I took a long chance when I put her into the lead in New York—an unknown English girl. But she can sing, she can dance, and what an *actress!* It played over eight-hundred performances! I gave her a bonus, an emerald necklace. It cost me a mint, but she's worth every cent of it." They entered the salon, where dancing was in full swing. "I'm hoping," said Delaney, "this starchy Thames River Authority'll soon grant me a better mooring-place. The arguments I've had with these bureaucrats! I need to be located more upriver, off the fashionable West End—not here off the East End, all dockside slums."

He opened a door. "Through here," he said, "there are some cabins where the musicians—"

He was interrupted by the violent bursting open of a cabin door. A stalwart man lurched out. He stood reeling, supporting himself with one hand on the jamb of the partly unhinged door.

"Good grief!" exclaimed Mark Twain. "Isn't that the Doctor Watson you introduced to me earlier?"

But Dion Delaney, hurrying forward along the blue-lit corridor, said anxiously, "What's wrong, Doctor?"

"I've been sandbagged," said Watson, breathing heavily. "For the rest—see for yourselves!"

At what they saw before them in Cabin Four, Mark Twain and Dion Delaney stood shocked upon the threshold.

Mark Twain took his cigar from his mouth.

"Delaney," he said slowly, "what we have here looks mighty like a case for Dr. Watson's well known friend."

In top hat and evening cape, the dignified gentleman with the monocle that he wore in either eye, according to whim or absence of mind, was among the group of ladies and gentlemen set ashore at Wapping Old Stairs by the Mississippi showboat's attendant pinnace.

Also among the group was A. J. Raffles' confederate, Bunny Manders, with an eye on Raffles.

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At the head of the steep flight of timeworn stone stairs, which had seen a good deal of Thames-side history, much of it criminal, waited a long line of sleek broughams and cockaded coachmen, and even a few plebian hansoms.

Lightly gossiping, the ladies and gentlemen, with much raising of hats and kissing of hands, mounted into their broughams to return to the West End, where they were more at home than in the squalid East End, but the man with the monocle and the emerald necklace turned to the right and headed, afoot, further into this dockland of ill repute.

He was followed, at a discreet distance, by Raffles—who was followed, at a discreet distance, by Manders.

Sherlock Holmes knew London's East End as few men knew it. His knowledge had often been of help to the hard men of the Thames River Constabulary, with their prowling launches, and the Force knew him well.

Leaning on the Mississippi showboat's upper-deck rail as he waited for Watson, Holmes was gazing across the starlit water at the dark loom of the shore. He knew the slums that sprawled behind the warehouses which lined for miles that dockside shore. He had participated in ugly events there, and he was thinking of these when a voice spoke quietly behind him.

"Mr. Holmes?"

He turned. On the deck ladies and gentlemen were still strolling to and fro, arm-in-arm, gossiping. To Holmes' surprise, standing before him was the guest of honor at this Fourth of July occasion, the river pilot from Hannibal on the Mississippi.

"Trouble down below," Mark Twain said, keeping his voice low. "Our host asked me to pass you the word. He and your friend the doctor are in Cabin Four." He pointed with his cigar. "Down the companionway there."

"Thank you, Mr. Clemens," Holmes said.

"Our host wants me to go around distributing handshakes and tall stories to keep our guests from thinking anything's wrong," said Mark Twain. "Every cobbler to his last, I guess."

"Quite so," said Holmes.

Making his way below, he thought, Trouble?

There would be trouble aplenty if, amid the revels of this American Night's Entertainment, Watson had diagnosed a case of infectious disease and declared the showboat and all on board quarantined.

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But Holmes saw at once that it was not pestilence that struck in Cabin Four. It was violence.

With a bulge swelling up redly through his black hairs, Watson was taking the pulse of a young woman who lay, apparently insensible, on the lower section of a two-tiered bunk. On the carpet lay another woman. Dion Delaney was in the act of removing a green hood that covered her head and face. She sat up, blinking with dazzled eyes. She looked about the same age as the girl on the bunk.

A small sack lay burst on the carpet, which was scattered with sand. Musical-instrument cases, empty and open, were on every article of furniture. Over a music stand a man's shirt, tie, collar and trousers were draped.

Watson, turning from the girl on the bunk, saw Holmes standing, aquiline and observant, in the partially wrecked doorway.

"Ah, Holmes," said Watson, "this young lady's beginning to come around. It's all most extraordinary. On entering the cabin, I was taken aback at seeing this other lady outstretched on the carpet with her head hooded and her wrists bound. As I stood incredulous, I was struck a massive blow on the occipital region of the cranium. I vaguely felt myself clutched and lowered to the carpet where, as my senses left me, I must have measured my length. On coming to, and realizing that foul play had been done in this cabin, I found that the door was locked. I drew back three paces, then immediately charged the door."

"With obvious effect," said Holmes. "You are a stalwart man, Watson."

The young woman who had been hooded picked up a dainty fan that lay on the floor. Fanning herself, she sat down exhaustedly beside the young woman on the bunk.

"It was during a waltz," said the young woman with the fan. "I noticed that Ann was nearly fainting on a banquette. I went to her aid. A man came up to me and said he was a doctor. He suggested that he help me take Ann to a cabin. He said he always carried a phial of smelling salts, for emergencies, and a whiff or two would soon put her right. Of course, I agreed. We laid Ann down on the bunk here—and the next second the hood was jerked over my head and the drawstring pulled tight at my throat."

"Delaney, let me see that hood," said Holmes. Examining it, he went on,"This hood is not, in fact, a hood as such. It's a bag of the

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kind in which musicians often carry their trombones, tubas, or other variously shaped wind instruments. Continue, young woman."

"I was pushed down onto the carpet," said the young woman who had been enbagged. "A cord was looped over my wrists and knotted. I feared I was about to be—well, what all women fear when manhandled. But what he really was after was Ann's emerald necklace."

"You saw him take it?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Delaney," said Holmes, "presumably you know these young ladies?"

"Of course. Miss Ann Rice plays the lead in a musical I've got in rehearsal at the Savoy. Miss Ida Beaumont, who sometimes plays walk-on roles for me, acts generally as my secretary," said Delaney.

"Miss Beaumont," said Holmes, "what did the miscreant look like?"

"He looked like a doctor."

"That doesn't tell us much. Dr. Watson here is a doctor."

"He doesn't look like one," said Ida Beaumont, fanning herself. "The other man *really* looked like a doctor. He had silvery hair and beard and a monocle."

"D'you recognize that description, Delaney?" Holmes asked.

"No," said the impresario—"although I know personally everybody I invited here."

"When Watson and I," said Holmes, "stepped from the pinnace onto the showboat, the Chief Steward was on duty at the gangway. He asked for our invitation cards, as no doubt he asked the other guests for theirs. A sensible precaution, the mooring-place of your showboat being by no means in the most select reach of the Thames. Who prepared and mailed the invitation cards?"

"Miss Beaumont," said Delaney, "from a list I gave her."

"So Miss Beaumont, if she so wished," said Holmes, "could have sent an invitation to somebody not on your list?"

Ann Rice sat up suddenly. Her eyes furious, she said, "How dare you! How *dare* you say such a thing about Ida? You insult her!"

Holmes, looking thoughtfully at Ann Rice, said "I'm glad to see you somewhat recovered, Miss Rice." He turned to Ida Beaumont. "Now, Miss Beaumont—you and the alleged doctor laid Miss Rice down on the bunk. Next second, this bag was jerked over your head, the drawstring was tied at your throat, your wrists were bound, and you saw the man seize Miss Rice's necklace?"

"Yes!"

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"You saw that," said Holmes, "through the *opaque green baize* of this bag?"

Ida Beaumont froze. The fan in her hand was stilled.

Holmes said gently, "What do *you* think, Miss Rice? What have *you* to say to that?"

Ann Rice had nothing to say to that. For a moment, with her lace-gloved hands pressed in consternation to her cheeks, she gazed intently at her interrogator, then she sank back on the cushions of the bunk. "It's no good," she said desolately. "Oh, Ida, it's *no good.*"

Neither the girls nor Watson nor Delaney moved. From the salon sounded the gay lilt of music.

"Delaney," said Holmes, "may I give these protégées of yours, the star and the walk-on, a word of advice?"

His rubicund face a study in perplexity, the impresario said huskily, "Go ahead."

"Then I suggest to them that they should be sure of their lines before they deliver them. Further, I now seriously advise these young actresses to tell us, for their own sakes, not only the truth about what's occurred here, but also the identity of the man who directed their performances in this—" said Sherlock Holmes "*—under-rehearsed melodrama.*"

Twenty minutes' walk from Wapping Old Stairs, by a cobbled way between smoke-blackened warehouses, brought the gentleman with the monocle to an area where slum clearance had been going on. Pitted and rubble-heaped, this area lay lifeless and devastated beside the starlit river.

Raffles stopped, in shadow, and watched the man in the evening cape and top hat walk on, solitary, along the cobbled way which was all that remained of a street once lined by tenements. The man was making for the one building that stood undemolished in this area of destruction. Stark in the starlight, the building loomed up like a deserted warehouse. It backed upon a jetty.

The man walked round to the back of the building, where he disappeared. Raffles walked on quickly to the building. Over its front entrance was a marquee of twisted iron and shattered glass. Bits of glass on the cobbles gritted under his shoes as he moved in to look at two large placards, stained and peeling, scrawled on by obscene graffiti. The prominent printing on the placards was just legible in the starlight:

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JETTY THEATRE
(Dockland's Playhouse of Melodrama)

COSMO SIMMS
in
UNCANNY PARSON PRYMM

Stealthily, Raffles followed the man to the back of the dark theatre. From a cobbled quay, the jetty of decaying planks on spidery ironwork supports, to which two dinghies were moored, jutted out into the river.

At the back of the theatre was a door, probably the stage door. Putting his handkerchief over the doorknob, Raffles tried the door gently. It was locked. He put an eye to the keyhole. Through it he saw a dim light that, coming from some room on the right, glimmered on the flagstoned floor and stone walls of a passage.

Using his picklock, Raffles got the door open and entered, gently closing the door behind him. Soundless, he moved along the passage to the half open door from which the light came. Looking into the room, he saw a campbed and a dressing table. On the table was an unlit gas-ring with a kettle on it. A lighted candle in a tall candlestick was reflected in the dressing-table's tarnished gilt-framed mirror. On the cluttered table lay the emerald necklace, a doorkey, a police whistle, a monocle, a silvery beard and wig. Divested of the latter, the man in evening dress, who was seated at the dressing-table, was as an egg. His evening cape and top hat lay on the campbed.

He was drinking whisky from a bottle. He set the bottle down with a belch of satisfaction, passed the back of his hand over his mouth, and made to pick up the necklace. But Raffles, with a quick step, was there first.

"No, you don't!" Raffles said, seizing the necklace.

Breath shocked from him, the bald man glared, unbelieving, at Raffles' reflection, dim in the dingy mirror. The bald man must, to drink, have removed cheekpads from his mouth, for his cheeks were fallen in, his nose was more prominent, he seemed to have aged considerably. "How did you get in here?" he asked.

"The same way you did," said Raffles.

"I belong here—I'm the lessee and manager of this theatre."

"And its resident actor," said Raffles—"Mr. Cosmo Simms?"

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"I locked that outer door," said the bald man, not denying his identity.

"We have our methods," said Raffles.

Hitching his chair around and peering at Raffles, Simms said, "Yard?"

Raffles said, "Didn't it occur to a bright man like you, Simms, that a detective of some kind, official or private, would probably be present at an occasion like the one taking place on that Mississippi showboat?"

Licking his lips, his eyes cunning, Simms said, "I can make it worth your while."

"Come off it," said Raffles. "You know better than to attempt bribery."

"Then damn you, copper," said Simms. "I've committed no crime."

"You hooded and bound a woman," said Raffles. "That's no crime? You stole this necklace from another woman. That's no crime? You sandbagged a man who interrupted you. That's no crime?"

"The girls were in it with me."

"Oh, come, Simms—is that the best you can do?"

"It's the God's truth!"

"Then let's hear it. I can spare a minute or two before I put the gyves on you." Pocketing the necklace, Raffles picked up the whistle from the dressing-table. "Then I'll blow this for the River Police to come and take you for a joyride in their launch."

"That whistle's all that's left of a bobby's costume," Simms said wearily—"gone now like all the rest of this theatre's stock wardrobe. I can't even boil this kettle. The gas is cut off. This old warehouse I turned into a theatre is for demolition. My twenty-year lease is up. The theatre's been closed for weeks. *Uncanny Parson Prymm* was the farewell appearance of Dockland's Favourite Mummer, Cosmo Simms."

"The last appearance but one," said Raffles.

Simms drank from his bottle and wiped his lips with his hand. "Actor's Ruin, this stuff," he said. "Next week the tipstaff and his bully boys'll be around here to implement an eviction order and throw me into the gutter. I'm bankrupt. And unless his show *Petticoat Lane* at the Savoy is a hit, the great producer Dion Delaney is another one for Carey Street."

"Delaney?"

"I thought that'd surprise you, copper. Listen—let me tell you about Delaney and those two girls, Ann Rice and Ida Beaumont!

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How it *was*, you see, one cold night, with a freezing fog off the river, I'd taken in just about enough at the box office, playing *Sweeney Todd*, to buy me a couple of drinks. I walked round to the Turk's Head Pub used to be near here. It's gone now, like all the life there used to be around here. It was slum life, yes—shrieking kids, yelling fishwives, brawling stevedores. But it was *life*, copper. It's gone now, the people—my public—gone God knows where. Slum clearance, it's called."

Simms mopped his head with a towel sleazy with greasepaint.

"But that night of freezing fog—ten years or more ago, though it seems like yesterday—I heard a piano playing and a child singing "Can she bake a cherry pie, Billy Boy?" But it wasn't a piano, it was a pianola on wheels outside the Turk's Head, and in the foggy light of a street lamp a little slum girl was changing the rolls of the pianola and another little slum girl was singing. She was dancing, too. That's how it *was*, you see, copper. Annie was *dancing*—and she touched my heart."

Simms blubbered into the filthy towel.

"If you're *acting* now," Raffles said, his voice steely, "I promise you, Simms, I'll blow this whistle and have you put away."

"Two little slum girls—eight, nine years old," said Simms, looking with bloodshot eyes at Raffles in the candlelight. "Ida's dad had kicked the bucket, leaving just his old pianola, and Ida had teamed up with Annie to keep the show on the road. Know what they used to say around here? 'It's the poor wot 'elps the poor.' That's the code of the slums, copper, in case you didn't know.

"I'd no money except what I took at the box office—little enough, God knows—but I helped those two little girls. I taught them a thing or two about the Muse of the Masque. I wrote a play for them—*Uncanny Parson Prymm*. I wrote it for them *and* for me. Twice nightly, with a matinée Saturdays, I *killed* those two little girls. With these hands," said Cosmo Simms, "I strangled them. There wasn't a dry eye in the house when Annie died. I was hissed, I was spat on, kids fell silent and shrank away when they saw me coming and going, walking the mean streets. I was a great success as Parson Prymm."

Simms drank from his bottle. "Time after time I revived that play," he said. "It was surefire here in dockland, it never failed. But, for me, it was never quite the same after Ann and Ida went."

"Went where, Simms?"

"To America, with Dion Delaney," said Cosmo Simms. "I got the girls jobs in the carriage-trade theatres, up West Shaftesbury Av-

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enue and the Strand. They learned how ladies behave. But they could act *anything*—especially Ann. She had the gift. Delaney saw it in her. He took her to New York—and Ida, too, as his secretary. Delaney took a gamble on Ann. He put her into *Petticoat Lane*, in the lead. The show was a smash hit. Know what *The New York Times* said? 'When Ann Rice dances, time stands still.' Delaney gave her a bonus."

"This?" said Raffles, holding up the necklace.

Here in the candlelight, in this condemned theatre, the dangling emeralds glittered balefully green.

Set ashore by the Mississippi showboat's attendant pinnace, Holmes and Watson were walking up the steep steps of Wapping Old Stairs.

"I find it rather touching, the story you've got out of those two young women, Holmes," Watson said.

"Laughter and tears, Watson," said Holmes, "have been the quintessence of stage life behind the scenes ever since *Pagliacci.*"

To the driver of a hansom cab in the line of private broughams waiting at the head of the Old Stairs, Holmes said, "Do you know where the Jetty Theatre is?"

"It's not far from 'ere, sir, but it's closed. It's been condemned."

"Nevertheless, take us there," Holmes said—and followed by Watson, he mounted into the hansom.

"How d'you think Delaney will take what he's heard?" Watson asked.

"That's up to him, Watson. It's no concern of ours."

"What are your intentions, Holmes?"

"I intend to lay hands on the man," Sherlock Holmes said grimly, "who's in possession of that emerald necklace."

The emeralds glittered in the candlelight as A. J. Raffles returned the necklace to the pocket of his dinner coat.

"It cost Delaney a mint, that necklace," said Cosmo Simms, "but it's not a fleabite compared with what that Mississippi showboat, all lit up, has cost him. He's borrowed right and left—bands, angels, the lot—to put *Petticoat Lane* on in London."

"How d'you know that, Simms?"

"Ann told me. She *had* to. How it *was*, you see, copper, the girls used to send me dollar drafts. I drank them, needless to say. So then I got the tipstaff after me. So I explained to the girls, when they got

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back from America, that I was to be flung into the gutter to starve like a mangy cur. Well, they wanted to help me, as I'd helped *them* to rise up out of the gutter. But they hadn't enough to do me any good. Delaney had borrowed most of what they'd earned in New York."

"Delaney borrowed from the *girls*?"

"He's hard-pressed," said Simms. "He's got that showboat on his hands, and the rent of the Savoy Theatre, and salaries of a big cast of an expensive show in rehearsal. He didn't mind borrowing money from the girls and they didn't mind lending it to him. After all, he'd paid them the money in the first place. It'll all come right if *Petticoat Lane* is a hit at the Savoy. The girls'll get their money back—with bells on. But they'd no ready money to help me with, and the only way to raise it was on Ann's necklace. Only, what it *is*, you see copper," said Cosmo Simms, "is Delaney's *jealous* of me."

"Jealous of *you?*" said Raffles.

"He's never seen me," said Simms, "but he knows what I've done for the girls—raised them out of the gutter, been to them like a Svengali with two Trilbys. He's jealous of me. If Ann's necklace went missing and she said she'd lost it, Delaney'd smell a rat. But give him his due. He *gave* her that necklace, and he wouldn't let her sell it back to help *him*. If he suspected she'd sold it to help *me*, he'd go berserk. The girls can't affort to upset Dion Delaney. He holds their money *and* their careers in the hollow of his hand."

"So you had to fake a robbery," Raffles said.

"We had to *stage* it, copper. We had to act it out—on that showboat—to convince Delaney it was a real robbery. It all went according to script. I gave Ann a sedative, maybe a bit too strong, to help her with her swoon. And then, as I was setting the scene in Cabin Four, a doctor came knocking at the door. Luckily, I'd picked up a sandbag to use if I was interrupted.

"I didn't think I would be. I knew the orchestra men were using the cabins, but they were busy in the salon—I could hear them, and I reckoned to be gone, safe ashore, before any musician came to the cabin, found the door locked, and yelled for the Chief Steward to bring a master key. Then, of course, he'd find the scene I'd set, he'd send for Delaney, and Delaney would see for himself—and he couldn't *doubt* but that Ann had been robbed. But then this doctor came knocking at the door and spoilt the act. I had no option but to slug him—and, anyway, it made it all more convincing."

"Simms," said Raffles, "your brain is rotted with whisky and self-

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pity. Those girls, actresses as they are, could never keep up their act for long under police interrogation. You talked them into this without a thought of what it could mean for *them*. You've probably ruined them with Delaney, and by assaulting the doctor you've made your crazy conspiracy *criminal*, you play-acting maniac!"

"All right!" Simms shouted. "Put the gyves on me—*if you can!*" He blew out the candle.

The room in total darkness, Raffles had difficulty in finding the door to the passage. But the outer door at the end of the passage was wide open and he could see starlight on the river. He made his way toward it and as he emerged from the doorway, a figure flitted to his side. His arm was gripped.

"I was standing over there, in shadow," said Manders, breathless. "This door opened and a man ran out onto the jetty! He started to climb down into a dinghy—and half the jetty canted and collapsed on top of him!"

Raffles drew in his breath. He said, "Bunny, take this necklace and vanish. I'll see if anything can be done for that poor abject devil."

Manders took the necklace and vanished. Raffles walked to the edge of the cobbled quay. Tangled ironwork and rotted planks lay semi-submerged in the murky water. Suddenly, as his eyes quested the wreckage for some sign of Cosmo Simms, he heard the clink and clip-clop of a horse's hoofs. He turned. Approaching rapidly along the cobbled way across the devastated area were the candlelamps of a jolting, swaying hansom.

Raffles felt quickly in the pocket of his dinner-coat. He took out his picklock and the police whistle which, unconsciously, he had pocketed when plunged into darkness in the condemned theatre. He threw the picklock far out into the river. He knew that on his next action might depend the life of the mummer. He hesitated for an instant—then put the police whistle to his lips.

In the hansom jolting over the cobbles, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson heard the shrilling of a police whistle. Again came the shrill summons piercing and imperative, cleaving the sultry stillness of the riverside night.

At a shout from Holmes, the cabbie reined in his horse with a savage jerk. Holmes leaped from the hansom. Followed by the stalwart Watson, the long-shanked Holmes raced across the pitted brick-littered ground toward a quay where he could make out a figure standing alone and shadowy, facing the river.

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Again the whistle shrilled—and as Holmes and Watson raced onto the cobbled quay the man with the whistle heard them. He turned.

"Help!" he shouted. "There's been an accident! A man ran out onto the jetty—it canted sideways and collapsed on him! I think he's trapped under the wreckage!"

Startlingly, a ray of glaring light lanced out over the water, traversed the river bank, and checked at the quay where the three men in evening dress stood blinded by the sudden dazzle.

A voice shouted, "Is that *you* there, Mr. Holmes? We heard a whistle!"

"Sergeant Lynch?" Holmes shouted. "Pull in! Part of this old jetty's collapsed. A man may be pinned under the wreckage."

The searchlight ray tilted down, starkly illuminating the semi-submerged wreckage as the River Police launch chugged in closer.

Holmes said to the man with the whistle, "Who are you, sir?"

"My name, sir, is Raffles."

"Holmes," Dr. Watson exclaimed, "this is A. J. Raffles, captain of the England cricket team! I *thought* I recognized him. I've seen him play at Lord's Cricket Ground many a time."

"Do you usually carry a police whistle, Mr. Raffles?" Holmes asked.

"Not usually," said Raffles. "But the betting gangs that corrupt horse-racing and boxing are turning their attention to cricket, and they operate mostly out of the East End here. I had a social engagement tonight in this area, and I had no desire to be, as the hooligans say, 'nobbled' on the eve of a test match against Australia, so I armed myself with a police whistle."

Sergeant Lynch shouted from the launch, "Mr. Holmes, it's a low water—mostly mud—but we've got hold of something with the boathooks! Feels like a body—we're trying to fish it out!"

Holmes said, "So, Mr. Raffles, I assume you're one of Mr. Dion Delaney's guests on his showboat. What brought you to this building?"

"An incident on the showboat," said Raffles. "I was watching Miss Ann Rice, the actress, when—"

"Why were you watching Miss Rice?"

"I was hoping to get the next dance with her," Raffles explained, "but I saw her apparently taken ill. A lady and gentleman went so promptly to her aid and to assist her out of the salon that I had the impression they'd been *expecting* her to be taken ill. Frankly, this piqued my curiosity. I opened the door through which Miss Rice had

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been assisted but there was no one to be seen in the corridor, so I went back into the salon. But I kept my eye on the door."

"Why?" said Holmes.

"I hoped Miss Rice might quickly recover from her faintness and return to the salon. But only the gentleman returned—and I noticed an odd thing. When he left the salon with the ladies, he was wearing a monocle in his left eye. When he came back into the salon, he was wearing the monocle in his right eye."

"You're an observant man, Mr. Raffles," Holmes said.

"A team captain in first-class cricket, Holmes," said Dr. Watson, "is alert to details. He *has* to be."

"Anyway," said Raffles, "I felt sure there was something bogus about the man. I was intrigued. He immediately boarded the pinnace that was taking a number of guests from the showboat to Wapping Old Stairs and I joined the group. At the head of the Old Stairs, the man ignored the waiting line of broughams and cabs. He walked off to the right and I followed him to this building, whatever it is."

"*I* know what it is," said Holmes. "Did the man enter the building?"

"He certainly came round to this quay at the back here," said Raffles, "but when I got here myself there was no sign of him. I assumed he'd entered the building by that door there, which was shut."

"And locked?"

"That I don't know," said Raffles. "I wasn't sure what best to do. I waited around for a while, keeping in shadow. Suddenly, just about as I'd decided to return to the showboat and find out if anything untoward had happened on board, that door opened and a man stepped out. In the starlight, I could tell it was the man I'd followed, I knew him by his build. But his appearance was altered. His silvery hair and beard and his monocle were gone, and his head was quite bald. He looked around as if to see if the coast was clear. He started to go back into the building, but just then—he spotted me. I think it was because of my white shirtfront."

"And then?"

"He seemed to panic," said Raffles. "He ran out onto the jetty, apparently making for a dinghy moored there, but—well, you can see what happened! I immediately used this whistle in the hope there might be a River Police launch in the vicinity."

"Mr. Holmes!" Sergeant Lynch shouted, "We've got the body aboard—most of its clothes ripped off by splintered ironwork!"

Holmes called, "I see some steps at the end of the quay here—try

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to bring your launch alongside the steps! Besides your searchlight, have you any flashlamps on board?"

"We've got several, sir!"

"Throw one of them up here!" Holmes turned to Raffles. "Mr. Raffles, you're a cricketer. Be so good as to catch the flashlamp for us. Throw it, Sergeant!"

Sergeant Lynch threw the flashlamp. Raffles grabbed for it—and missed.

The flashlamp smashed on the cobbles.

"I'm *so* sorry," he said.

As the police launch sidled in to the quay steps, Sergeant Lynch jumped onto them. He joined the three men on the quay lit by the launch's searchlight.

"Here's another flashlamp for you, Mr. Holmes," he said, "if you still need one."

"I do," said Holmes. "I want to take a look inside the building. Wait here, gentlemen, please."

Sherlock Holmes walked in through the open stage door of the condemned theatre.

Dr. Watson said, "This is a strange business, Mr. Raffles."

"I've never experienced anything like it before," said Raffles.

"And nothing like that Mississippi showboat ever floated on the Thames before," said Sergeant Lynch, "you can lay to that. . ."

Holmes, not long gone, rejoined the three men.

"Mr. Raffles," Holmes said, "you'll be required, of course, as a witness at the inquest."

"Of course," said Raffles.

"I have a suggestion to make to you," said Holmes. "With some diffidence, I suggest that you allow Sergeant Lynch to search you. I think that possibly could be of help to the Coroner."

"In that case," said Raffles, "go ahead, Sergeant."

Lynch searched Raffles expertly and showed Holmes the result—a police whistle, a handkerchief, eight gold sovereigns and some small change, a slim gold cigarette-case, and a gold half hunter watch.

"Return them to Mr. Raffles," Holmes directed. "Thank you, Mr. Raffles. Dr. Watson and I are now going on board the police launch. I want to examine the corpse. If you care to use the hansom Dr. Watson and I came here in, will you please give the driver this half sovereign?"

"Certainly, Mr. Holmes."

"I'm obliged to you, Mr. Raffles."

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"Not at all, Mr. Holmes . . ."

The Mississippi showboat was a scene of fairy lights and music, unique upon the Thames, when the police launch slid alongside and Holmes and Watson stepped onto its open foredeck. The police launch, bearing the body of Cosmo Simms to the mortuary which seldom was without a resident corpse or two fished from the Thames, chugged on upriver.

Holmes and Watson went directly to the showboat's blue-lit corridor of cabins and of recesses containing coiled hoses, sandbags, and red-painted water-buckets. They had the corridor to themselves. Cabin Four's door, damaged by the stalwart shoulder of Watson, still hung askew. There was nobody in the cabin, where the light burned serenely and nothing was changed. Music from the salon was faintly audible.

"An American Night's Entertainment," said Holmes—"and the Death of a Mummer." He took a key from the pocket of his dinner coat. "This key is all I found when I examined the corpse on the police launch and searched the pitifully few rags that still adhered to it. I think we'll find that this key fits the door of this cabin." He tried the key in the lock. "Yes, it fits."

"Does that prove anything?"

"No more than was proved by my examination of the corpse. Its injuries are perfectly consistent with the statement made to us by Mr. A. J. Raffles. Equally consistent was his appearance. He certainly had been engaged in no struggle on the jetty, nor was there evidence of a struggle in the one habitable room in the condemned theatre. Mr. Raffles' evening-dress was immaculate. Simms' death was certainly an accident. Mr. Raffles will be commended by the Coroner for the promptitude with which he blew that police whistle to summon help."

"I was surprised that you had him searched, Holmes."

"Surprised, were you, Watson? How's your head?"

"It aches a little, but nothing to signify. In my medical-student days I played rugby football for Edinburgh Academicals. My head was often kicked in the scrum, by heavy boots, without permanent effect."

"And so now, in your maturity, you watch the cricket at Lord's?" Holmes asked, a slight smile on his firm lips.

"I know no pleasanter place in London to spend a spare hour or

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two on a summer afternoon, Holmes. I've often seen A. J. Raffles play there."

"So you told me," said Holmes. "I'm glad to have met Mr. Raffles. He strikes me as being an exceptional man—a man of keen observation, with the rare gift of instant decision."

"The qualities of a fine captain of cricket, Holmes, and a nimble batsman."

"No doubt," said Holmes. "Meantime, no apparent crime has been committed tonight. Whose is the emerald necklace? Miss Rice's. Was the 'robbery' contrived for a criminal purpose—that of, say, defrauding an insurance company? It was not. It was contrived merely for the purpose of bamboozling the man who gave Miss Rice the necklace. There's no crime in that. When Cosmo Simms made off with the necklace, was his intention fraudulent? No. His intention was merely, with Miss Rice's consent, to raise money on it. There's no crime in that."

"But I was sandbagged, Holmes!"

"Yes," said Holmes. "That was an invidious act by the tragic mummer, but nothing can be done about it. You can't sue him for assault, because he's confined to the mortuary, so I'm afraid you'll get no redress. But tell me something, Watson. Are you going to this test match that Mr. Raffles mentioned?"

"I hope to see an hour or two of it, Holmes. I have a ticket for it."

"It's possible, of course," said Holmes, "that the emerald necklace, along with the tatters of Simms' evening-dress, is somewhere in the mud back there at the jetty. Still, see if you can get me a ticket for the test match."

"I can certainly do that, Holmes."

"Then I'll come to the match with you. I'd like to see more of A. J. Raffles in action. Have you ever seen him, when he's fielding, miss a catch, Watson?"

"I can't say I have, Holmes. He fields at first slip and he's generally considered to have the safest pair of hands in cricket."

"You interest me, Watson. I'll venture on a prediction. I predict that the missing necklace will *not* be found," said Sherlock Holmes, "in the mud of the Thames estuary."

While the Fourth of July revels still were going on aboard the Mississippi showboat, all lit up on the Thames, Raffles walked into the living room of his confederate's flat in Mount Street in the fashionable West End. There he found Manders anxiously waiting.

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"Pour me a whisky," Raffles said. "I'm told it's Actor's Ruin, and I've been doing a bit of acting, but I found it hard work, as I had to make up my own lines, so I need a stiff drink." His keen, tanned face was fine-drawn, the effect of strain. "I've been interrogated, Bunny, by the cleverest man in London—Sherlock Holmes—and he damned nearly tricked me. He had me thrown a catch."

"A catch?"

"He asked me to catch a flashlamp. I realized why. He wanted my fingerprints on it," said Raffles. "I took good care to miss. Not that I've left any fingerprints anywhere. I've been careful—even when the man we followed to the Jetty Theatre blew out a candle and left me in the dark. His name, by the way, was Cosmo Simms. He's dead. This police whistle belonged to him, but it was I who blew it."

"I saw a hansom coming," said Manders. "I ducked into a pit. I heard a police whistle. The hansom went past hell-for-leather. I got out of the pit and ran like a jack rabbit."

"What makes you so helpful, Bunny, is that you're always true to your nickname," Raffles said. "Sherlock Holmes was in that hansom, but he's not like you. He didn't run *from* that whistle when he heard it, he ran *to* it."

"Oh, dear God!" said Manders, white in the face.

Raffles took a drink.

"Cosmo Simms told me a pathetic story," he said. "One night, ten years or so ago, he found two ragged little slum girls outside a pub in a freezing riverside fog. One of the little girls was handling the rolls for a tinny old pianola on wheels, and the other little girl was singing and dancing. Simms claimed she touched his heart."

He went on,"Simms was impecunious, but he helped those two little girls. He taught them his craft—how to don the motley, the paint, and the powder. To lift them out of the gutter they were born in, he killed them twice nightly, with a Saturday matinée, in a play called *Uncanny Parson Prymm*. Fill the glasses, Bunny."

Manders filled the glasses.

"I give you a toast," Raffles said. "I give you Cosmo Simms, play-actor. And I give you Ann Rice and Ida Beaumont. When they learned that Simms was to be flung into the gutter, they knew it was through his own fault but they were true to the code of the slums they were born in and put their careers at risk to try to help the man who'd helped them."

Raffles and Manders drank.

"I have to attend an inquest," Raffles said. "Inquests on bodies

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fished out of the Thames are so frequent and perfunctory they hardly rate a line in the newspapers. I'm not uneasy about the inquest, but I'm uneasy about the girls. They conspired to deceive a jealous man—Dion Delaney. How will he take it? Give me the necklace, Bunny."

Manders did so. The emeralds shone like a cat's green eyes in the gaslight.

Pocketing the necklace, Raffles said, "I'm going to see Ivor Kern, our resourceful fence. West End, East End, he has informers planted all over London. He won't like what I'm going to ask him to do, but he'll arrange for it to be done."

"For *what* to be done?" asked Manders, mystified.

"For this necklace to be found," said Raffles, "and taken to a police station."

"*Found?*" said Manders, incredulous. "Who's to find the necklace?"

"Some longshoreman or stevedore."

"Where's he to find it?"

"In the foreshore mud of the Thames estuary," said Raffles—"when the tide's out."

Back in the frontier days of the American West, before Mark Twain became a pilot on the Mississippi and found fame, he had been a newspaperman and itinerant printer. He had called it "a good loose trade."

In the first grey daylight of this fifth of July, Mark Twain was in a hansom jingling along a London street called the Strand. At this early hour, the street of many theatres was almost deserted, but he noticed a ragged boy untying a bundle of newspapers on an empty orange box at the corner of a cul-de-sac.

Habitually interested in newsprint, Mark Twain paid off the cabbie, bought a newspaper from the boy at the makeshift newsstand, and walked on into the cul-de-sac.

At the dead end, the façade of the Savoy Hotel loomed up imposingly, with, adjoining it at right angles, the Savoy Theatre, where the boards were out:

Opening July 17th—the Dion Delaney Production

ANN RICE
In the Musical Play
PETTICOAT LANE

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Unfolding his newspaper as he walked, Mark Twain glanced at the front page:

LONDON'S SHOWBOAT INAUGURATED
MARK TWAIN'S WITTY SPEECH

He felt a tug at the tails of his dinner coat.

" 'Ere, arf a tick, mister! It ain't proper money!"

Mark Twain looked at the coin exhibited to him on the newsboy's grubby palm.

"My mistake," Mark Twain admitted. He took the disparaged coin, tucked it into the pocket of his white vest, and fished another coin from the change in his trousers pocket. "Is this one O.K.?"

"Gorblimey, *arf-a-crown!*" exulted the boy. "Thenks muchly, guv!" He ran back to his newsstand to make sure no passing skinflint pinched a paper from it, and Mark Twain walked on into the hotel.

His room was on the third floor. Daylight was strengthening in the room as he entered it. He put his top hat and newspaper on a chair and went to the window and opened it. Early air came in freshly. He stood looking out at the Thames.

It was no giant of a river, compared with the majestic Mississippi, but the sky was limpid with the pearly hues of imminent sunrise and he could see, not far off from where he stood, the clock tower of the Houses of Parliament and, just beyond, the roof of venerable Westminster Abbey.

He took the rejected coin from his vest pocket.

"Not proper money," he said, half aloud. "Impudent young rascal!"

Boys! Rich or poor, princes or paupers, boys were much the same in all ages and in all lands. Boys had in them something that for most of them endured, as it endured in him, all life long—something of Huckleberry Finn.

Mark Twain put down on the windowsill the coin that was graven with the head of George Washington.

Big Ben began to strike the hour.

Absently, as he unfastened the studs of his dress-shirt, Mark Twain counted the ponderous strokes.

It was six o'clock of a midsummer morning, and the tide was coming in.

(Ed. Note: There will be an interview with Barry Perowne in the April issue of *EQMM.)*

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That was one of the troubles about being with Barnes—sometimes she got mixed up about doing what she should . . .

ERROR ELIMINATION

by PATRICIA JOHNSTONE

Fay regretted getting involved with Barnes. She would have liked to break things off if only she knew how. He sensed that, and gave her a couple of lessons before she even needed them, just to show her who was in charge.

She saw, for example, the way he treated the garage mechanic.

Barnes had left his car at the garage for a service and minor repairs, and one of the repairs had not been done: the radiator gauge still wasn't working. It might have been the young mechanic's fault, and it might have been somebody else's. Barnes didn't bother to find out. It was late in the day and the youth was the only employee still at the garage. Barnes simply swung his arm and hit him on the side of the head.

"You can't do that!" the mechanic said in a shocked voice. Barnes did it again, getting him on the other side.

"You saw that!" The mechanic was almost sobbing. He came edging and whining toward Fay. "You saw what he did!"

She nodded, a hand covering her open mouth.

"She didn't see a thing," Barnes said. He put a heavy hand on her shoulder. "Did you, honey?" His fingers pummeled at her shoulder, quite gently.

After a moment she shook her head. She knew she shouldn't, but she did. That was one of the troubles about being with Barnes—sometimes she got mixed up about doing what she should.

The mechanic blurted out something about suing, and Barnes chuckled. "You'll need my address." He gave him a card, one of his ivory cards with the address of his law office written below his name in copperplate.

After they had driven away, Fay said, "I wish you wouldn't, Barnes. Really I do."

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"The stupid lout deserved it." Barnes was still chuckling to himself. "Teach him not to mess me around."

She remembered that phrase when he used it later. That was on the evening when she plucked up all her courage and told him she thought maybe they were not well suited after all. "I think we should call the wedding off, Barnes," she said earnestly.

"Are you serious?"

"For the good of us both," she said.

"Honey," he said. "Baby. You know what happens to people who call off weddings? They get a breach-of-promise slapped on them." He smiled at her playfully.

"You wouldn't," she said. He went on smiling at her. "Would you?" she said.

He reached over and put a hand around the back of her neck. She could feel, very slightly, the pressure of the thumb on one side and the four fingers on the other.

He said in her ear, "Doesn't arise, honey. You're not going to mess me around, now are you?"

"No," she said. She felt confused. That wasn't what she'd intended to say, but it seemed wiser to leave things as they were.

And so the wedding was to go ahead as planned. One lunchtime Barnes and Fay met in Bonavista's, the best department store in town, to shop for some major items. Barnes had brought along his Bonavista charge card and he was in a generous mood. Fay, not thinking ahead too far, in fact not thinking ahead at all, was allowing herself to get excited about fine linen and bone china and electrical goods.

A difficulty soon arose. Sales slips had to be made out and signed for separately in each department, and Barnes objected. He stolidly refused. The assistants were perplexed by his obstinacy. At last someone from the manager's office was sent for. He was a young man called Mr. Farley, nervously anxious to please the customers.

Barnes smiled sharkishly when he saw him. "Now, Farley," he said, "I am about to spend a lot of money. All I ask is that I be spared the inconvenience of having to sign in every department. Your job—" he tapped the breathless young man on the chest with his buying card "—is to collate it all for me. And, Farley—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't keep the lady waiting any longer than you can help, will you?"

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Fay gazed at the carpeting. When Barnes talked in that velvety, half threatening voice, she was in danger of remembering things she would rather forget. After a while, simply for the pleasure of it, her eyes strayed to the sets of bed linen she had chosen—palest blue, edged with white.

"Right you are, sir," Farley said cheerfully. "I'll pass the entries myself, put them all down under linen, and sort it out later." With help of three assistants running to and from the other departments, he wrote out the long sales docket.

Barnes handed over his charge-card and Farley smiled apologetically. "I have to check it out," he murmured. "It's such a large purchase. You understand." He went off to check Barnes' credit rating.

He came back, looking worried. "I can't explain it, sir, but the computer rejects your card."

"Is that so?" Barnes said with veiled nastiness. "On what grounds?"

"Deceased."

"*Deceased?*"

"I'm terribly sorry. Obviously it's a mistake in our records."

"How very shrewd of you," Barnes said. "I suggest you put it right."

"Yes," Farley said unhappily. "But I'm afraid I'll have to ask you for identification."

If there had been no other people there, Farley might have got a blow on the head at that point. As it was, Barnes contented himself with leaning forward and saying in a menacing voice, "The manager, Farley. Get the manager, right?"

Farley disappeared again. He returned with an older man who blinked at them all through gold-rimmed spectacles. He wore a fair-isle pullover, and his wispy grey hair gave his head a vulnerable appearance.

"I'm extremely sorry," he said to Barnes. "I don't know how our data input system can have made this error. We'll certainly do our utmost to correct our computer records, but I'm afraid it's going to take quite a while."

"Wrong again," Barnes said. "It's going to take you five minutes and no longer if you don't want to find yourselves sued out of business."

The manager looked at Barnes carefully. Being a good deal shorter, he had to tilt his head back to do so. "Dear me," he said

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consideringly. "Freddy—" He was still gazing at Barnes, but summoning young Farley to his side. "I do believe we are going to have to use the quick method of error elimination."

"Oh, please, no." Farley sounded miserable. "Please don't ask me to go through all that."

Barnes smirked. "Yes," he said, "I'd advise you to use the quickest method you've got."

"No, please," Farley said.

"If you'll be so good as to follow me, sir," the manager murmured. "No, not you, madam," he said to Fay. "We shan't be long." He ushered Barnes to a door marked *Private*.

He was not very long, hardly more than five minutes, but he came back without Barnes and Farley. He was holding Barnes' credit card.

"Ah, there you are, Mrs.—um—" He looked at Barnes' name on the card.

"Miss Wilson," Fay said.

"Ah, Miss. Better, better. Well, you won't be needing this any more. It's quite useless now."

"Why?"

She watched as he took a neat pair of scissors from his shirt pocket and snipped the card in two.

"Dear me. Didn't we explain it to you? Sad to say, this customer is deceased."

Fay smiled. "That was the computer's mistake. I mean, Barnes isn't dead."

"I assure you he is," the man said solemnly. "Our computer is not in error."

She lost her smile. "But how can he be? He was standing here in good health just a few minutes ago. You know he was. I mean, you said yourself—"

She stopped, suddenly doubtful.

"I think you must be mistaken, Miss Wilson."

"But all these other people—" She looked around, but the sales assistants had vanished. "I don't understand," she said slowly.

"If our computer *were* to make an error," he said gently, "we would have to take steps to eliminate it."

She stared at him with her hand over her mouth.

He moved behind the counter. "I'm afraid we may have put you to some inconvenience. I hope you'll allow us to make amends?" He

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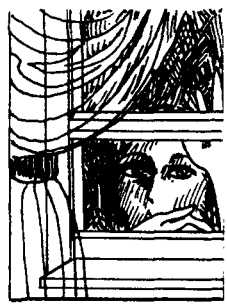
touched the linen she had chosen. Without blinking he said, "Would you accept half a dozen sets of bed linen with our compliments?"

By then she was beginning to know that she would never see Barnes again, and yet she still felt his influence. She felt confused about right and wrong. Perhaps she ought not to be accepting this gift. But, then again, how else was she to acquire the fine linen in palest blue edged with white lace?

"Why, thank you." She didn't blink either. "That would be lovely," she said.



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a ***NEW*** short story by

DONALD OLSON

"You can trust me," Richard said.

"We know we can, Baby," said Mother. "You've always been a real peach about keeping secrets. I'm mighty proud of you . . ."

I'LL NEVER TELL

by ***DONALD OLSON***

At sundown, unless they found a motel on the "clean and cheap" side, they would engage inexpensive but separate rooms in guest houses. To eleven-year-old Richard it was an advantage, for when they were obliged to stop at motels they would all three of them—Richard, Mother, and Uncle Bob—have to share the same room, and Richard, already missing his privacy, deplored such an arrangement.

Pleading fatigue, he usually retired to his own room once their bags were unpacked, and there, alone, he would move about rather like an inquisitive animal, not as Mother did in search of roaches and bedbugs and evidence of dirty linen but with a kind of burning wistfulness, seeking clues to previous occupants—books of matches bearing names of strange restaurants, scraps of paper, letters of such apparent intimacy the torn fragments in the wastebasket were evidence of deep secrecy, hairpins, buttons, items that might disclose the sex or business of the strangers who had passed through—and he would wonder what their names were, where they had come from and where, in the melon-sweet southern morning, they had gone.

And when it was time for his own departure, he would always leave behind some memento of his own presence: a wadded napkin, or a shoelace, projecting by these acts a precocious awareness of his own precarious way of life, as if he were being kidnapped and at-

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tempting to leave some clue to help a phantom rescuer follow his trail. The ritual might have been inspired by their never remaining very long in one place, their departures often swift and unpremeditated, leaving a trail of unpaid bills behind them.

On the evening they crossed the Florida line, they chose to stop at a once grand but now dilapidated house just off the main highway, where an arthritic, overweight lady by the name of Anna Koslowski was treated to the usual story: they were traveling on a strict budget in order to have more money to spend at Disney World, the object of their trip. Richard did not go immediately to his own room on this particular evening but remained with Mother and Uncle Bob, detecting in their manner a thickening of that constraint of which he'd had been aware all day.

"Will we get there tomorrow?" he inquired, munching a candy bar.

Mother exchanged looks with Uncle Bob, who nodded mysteriously, a slight smile on his bone-ribbed, freckle-dotted face. Richard knew Uncle Bob wasn't truly his uncle but merely a very close friend of Richard's father, someone who more or less looked after Richard and his mother.

Mother's light-blue eyes wore that deceptive look of freshness they seemed to acquire whenever she touched up her makeup, even though she hadn't done so and wouldn't until they went out to eat. Now she reached for both of Richard's hands and drew him close to her.

"Baby, I've got something to tell you. I hope you won't be too disappointed, but we're not going to Disney World after all."

Only a shadow of distress crossed his face. He was too accustomed to these little betrayals, all the promises she made and didn't keep—that they wouldn't have to move to another town, that he wouldn't have to face another new school—to reveal his true feelings.

"We're not?" was all he said.

"Someday we will, Baby, but not this trip."

"Why not? Can't we afford it?" For that was the usual explanation she offered for broken promises.

"It's not that, Baby. It's a surprise. Something much better than Disney World. I didn't want to tell you until I was sure it was going to happen."

She paused as if savoring the smile that grew upon her lips. She glanced toward Uncle Bob. "Well, go on," he chuckled, "tell him. Don't keep the kid in suspense."

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"Richard," she announced, very solemnly, "we came down here to meet Daddy."

It took a while for it to sink in. He suspected some trick. He studied her face for signs of insincerity, squinting up at her with a defensive and cautious uncertainty. "Honest?"

"Honest, Baby—and that's not all. Daddy's going to be with us from now on. We're all going to live together in a brand-new home. A wonderful place where it's always warm and sunny and you'll be able to stay in the same school until you graduate. Won't that be peachy?"

The prospect was too dazzling to be taken at face value. Too much like a dream come true. "I don't believe you," he said.

She laughed softly, cuddling him to her breast. "I don't blame you. But it's true. Ask Uncle Bob."

"But you said Daddy could never quit his job. That he was too important to the Service."

"I know, but everything's changed. Daddy's quitting."

"You mean they broke his cover?" It was the only explanation. That was why it had been drilled into him for years that he must never tell anyone about Daddy's work. That if Daddy's cover were broken he'd be in great danger. They all would. And although Mother and Uncle Bob never identified Daddy's employers by any name other than the Service, Richard knew what they meant. Daddy was some sort of spy. At times, when kids at a new school would press him about his father's occupation, he was tempted to blurt out the truth, but he never did. He had given Mother his sacred word and so he revealed nothing but that his father was in "foreign service." Richard himself could barely remember his father and wouldn't even know what he looked like were it not for the photograph he always kept with him, even tucking it under his pillow at night where he would talk to it before saying his prayers.

"Where are we going to live?" he asked Mother. "In Florida?"

"No, not Florida. Thousands of miles away. Out West."

"Near Disneyland?"

"Not very, no. But it's a big secret, Baby. It's all been arranged by the Service. We're even going to have new names. Won't that be exciting? And you'll meet new friends—friends you can keep."

This was almost too wonderful to digest. "Wow! What's my name going to be? Can I pick it out myself?"

Mother laughed. "I'm afraid not, Baby. The Service will do that. But you'll still be Richard. Only your last name will be changed."

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Uncle Bob hunched down beside them. "What you've got to remember, Sport, is that it's very important you keep this to yourself. Understand? If anyone found out—well, I guess you know it could be mighty dangerous for all of us."

"You mean the Russians?"

"*Any*body."

"I'll never tell. You can trust me."

"We know we can, Baby," said Mother. "You've always been a real peach about keeping secrets. I'm mighty proud of you."

"When are we going to meet Daddy?"

"Tomorrow night. And then we'll be on our way to our new home. Just like pioneers. And everything's going to be just the way I promised it would be when Daddy came home."

Richard was too excited to fall asleep quickly that night. In the dingy little bedroom, by the light of a pink-shaded lamp pinned over the bed, he lay gazing at the worn photograph of his father, studying each line and feature, the wide-spaced laughing eyes, the firm jaw, the tousled blond hair. It seemed a miracle that after tomorrow night he'd no longer need the picture to remember what Daddy looked like. They'd be together for ever and ever. They'd go on the hunting and fishing trips together Daddy had promised in the letters Mother read to him before burning them. (She said they mustn't be left around where prying eyes might see them and find out where Daddy was. Richard knew the danger. Spies were everywhere.)

In the morning they went out to a diner three blocks from the guest house and ate breakfast, which included hush puppies, a name that amused Richard: the South was in every way a more exotic experience than he had imagined. Mother and Uncle Bob seemed to share his excitement—a mood of hectic gaiety prevailed among them.

"Now, Baby," Mother said as they returned to the guest house, "you can amuse yourself for a while on your own. Uncle Bob and I have to do some grocery shopping so we can drive straight through tonight. Okay?"

"Sure."

He was in his room staring down at the back yard when the door opened behind him.

"Oh, I do beg your pardon, honey—I thought you all was still out! I just thought I'd come up and do the beds."

Mrs. Koslowski dropped her armful of bed linen on a chair and

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rubbed her hip as if she had completed an arduous climb up a very steep mountain.

"That's okay," Richard said.

"Your mama go out again, did she?"

"She went shopping with Uncle Bob."

The woman produced a colored brochure from the pocket of her baggy smock. "Here's somethin' I thought you all might want to take a gander at. All about Disney World. I was gonna leave it here on the table."

"Oh, we're not—" Richard caught himself just in time, remembering Mother's warning. Accepting the brochure, he pretended to study it with deep concentration. "I mean, we're not going there until after we leave here," he added lamely. "Thanks a lot, Mrs. Koz—Koz—" The name defeated him.

"Koslowski, honey. A mouthful, ain't it?"

"Is it—Russian?"

"Polish. My late husband's granddaddy come from over there."

Richard returned to the window. "What kind of big old tree is that down there?" he asked, fascinated by its drooping, aerial roots.

"That there's a banyan tree, honey. You ever see one before?"

"I've never been to Florida before. I've been to Chicago, though. And Cincinnati and St. Louis. Lots of places."

"Well, bless my soul, you all *are* a travelin' man."

She began stripping the bed, huffing and puffing as if it was a monumental labor. "What's this under your pillow, honey? You put it there didn't you?"

He turned to see her examining Daddy's photograph, squinting at it from arm's length. He said quickly: "Yes. It's mine. It's my daddy." Embarrassed at its discovery, he hoped she didn't think he was some sort of baby for keeping it under his pillow.

"Well, ain't he a fine-lookin' gent. Pity he couldn't come along with you all. Workin', is he?"

"Yes. But we're going on a fishing trip together next summer."

"That'll be nice." She carried the picture to the window and, pushing aside the dusty lace curtains for better light, studied it with effusively polite interest. "What's your daddy's name, honey?"

"Chauncey."

"Chauncey! Well, bless my soul, that's a good old-fashioned Yankee name, ain't it?"

"It's my middle name, too. Richard Chauncey. Only they call my daddy Chance."

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"Is that a fact now? Chance—" A little frown puckered her doughy brow. "Sorta cute, that is. Yes, sir, he does look more like a Chance than a Chauncey, meanin' no offense. Chauncey sounds sorta sissy-like. Your daddy ain't no sissy, that's plain to see. No more'n you are. When did you last see your daddy, honey?"

Accustomed to discouraging nosy curiosity, Richard replied in an absent-minded tone, "A little while back. He travels a lot in his work. —There's a big yellow cat down there in the yard. He belong to you?"

"That there's Ginger. Been with me for close on twelve years. Got arthritis near as bad as me. —You folks figgerin' on leavin' late tonight, like your mama said?"

"I guess so. I can't wait to see Disney World."

"Then you all *are* plannin' to go there?"

"Yes. Tomorrow morning."

Having put fresh linens on the bed, Mrs. Koslowski shuffled about the room making fluttery, ineffectual motions with a dustrag over the surfaces of the tables and bureau before saying, "I better get on with the other rooms before your folks get back."

"You want me to help?" Richard offered, bored now with the view from the window.

"Now ain't that sweet of you all. My hip *is* givin' me a real misery this mornin'."

When the task was done, Richard helped carry the soiled linen downstairs and was rewarded with a sugar cookie and a glass of cold lemonade in the dusky, cluttered living room. While doing the beds Mrs. Koslowski had mentioned having a son of her own, and now, spotting a photograph on the mantel shelf, Richard asked her if that was he. She nodded, picking it up and giving it one of her perfunctory dustings.

"Is he in the Army?" Richard inquired.

"You all mean the uniform? No, not now. He was, years back."

But *which* Army, Richard wondered. The uniform of the man in the photograph didn't look like an *American* Army uniform. "Does he live here, too?"

"No, but not far away. Got a good job, he has, an' a real pretty little wife. He's on night duty this week."

As soon as he was back upstairs, Richard tossed the brochure in the wastebasket and sat on the bed fondling Daddy's picture. He wished Mrs. Koslowski hadn't seen it. And yet he couldn't really see the old lady as a Russian spy, despite her name. To occupy himself

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while waiting for Mother and Uncle Bob to come back, he tried to decide what memento he could leave behind in this room when he went away. The brochure didn't qualify, that wasn't his. At length he decided nothing would be more appropriate than Daddy's picture. After all, he wouldn't need it after tonight.

With an air of ceremonial gravity, he carefully tore the picture into scraps and flushed it down the toilet—all but one piece of Daddy's smiling face, which after some thought he stuck away at the rear of the bottom drawer in the old painted chest by the window. It pleased him to imagine some stranger, some lonely friendless traveler, discovering the fragment of photograph, holding it under the pink-shaded lamp, and wondering: What is his name? When was he here? Where did he come from and where was he going?

When Mother and Uncle Bob arrived back, Richard detected a faint aroma on Mother's breath when she bent to kiss him. Her eyes looked unnaturally bright and dancing. "So what have you been doing, Baby?"

"Nothing. Just helping Mrs. What's-her-name with the beds. She's nice but she talks funny."

Mother and Uncle Bob laughed. She said, "Well, now I want you to lay yourself down and take a nap, okay? You've been missing a lot of sleep this week and I want you all fresh and rested when we take off."

"Aw, do I have to? I don't take *naps*."

"It won't hurt you, Baby. And Uncle Bob and I have a lot of things to talk over. We brought back some Kentucky Fried Chicken so we won't have to go out for lunch."

After the meal, Richard obediently lay down, but he was too excited to sleep. He kept thinking about Daddy—what he would look like, what he would say—and trying to imagine the sunny, warm place where they'd all soon be living together.

At six o'clock they went down to the diner and had a big meal of steak and french fries and apple pie.

"You fill up now, Baby," said Mother. "It might be quite a spell before we have another proper sit-down meal."

Back at the house, she helped him pack his small suitcase. "Now, Baby, I want you to stay here in your room. Don't go out, hear? Uncle Bob and I are going out in a little while to pick Daddy up—at the bus depot. The minute we get back I want you ready to go. And

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I don't want you talking to Mrs. Koslowski or anyone else, understand?"

"Sure."

She fondly brushed back his hair, blond like his father's and just as unruly.

"Why can't I go with you to meet Daddy?"

"Because you can't, that's why."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so. You just do like I say and before you know it Daddy will be with us and you'll see him every day from now on."

Presently Uncle Bob came into the room. "What's the hold-up? We've got to be there on the dot."

"I know, I know, I'm ready." Still she seemed reluctant to leave Richard, fussing with his hair and stroking his cheek.

"For heaven's sake, get a move on!" Uncle Bob snapped.

"I'm coming." She bent to give Richard a kiss and a hug. He knew she had butterflies in her stomach about meeting Daddy. Whenever she was nervous her breath always smelled the way it did now. Whenever Richard mentioned it she would laugh and say: "Mama's nerve medicine, Baby."

As soon as they were gone, Richard sat down on the bed, folded his hands in his lap, and tried to suppress his impatience, which grew more acute with each passing minute. Once he got up and pulled open the bottom drawer of the chest, picked out the scrap of photograph, and gently rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger before returning it to its hiding place.

They were gone far longer than he had expected. He wondered if the bus had been late. Impatience gradually sharpened into anxiety. Dreadful possibilities crossed his mind. Something had happened to the bus. Worse still, Daddy had changed his mind about quitting his job after all. Even more alarming, what if Mother and Uncle Bob had gone away without him, just left him here all by himself. Forever.

Once he stole to the door and crept out to peer down the stairs into the dimly lighted hallway. A clock chimed. From one of the lower rooms he could hear the sound of a TV set. He was still there when the front door opened. He quickly retreated to his room and shut the door. A moment later it was flung open and Uncle Bob, breathing hard and his face shiny with sweat, rushed straight for

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Richard's suitcase, snatching it up and making a grab for Richard's arm. "Come on! Quick!"

Before Richard could say a word, he was being all but dragged from the room, down the stairs, and outside. Uncle Bob didn't bother shutting the front door behind them.

Richard stumbled on the porch steps but Uncle Bob's fierce grip kept him from falling. The car's engine was running, and Mother, white-faced in the street light's acid glow, had both hands tight on the steering wheel.

Uncle Bob shoved Richard rudely into the back seat, thrust his bag in after him, slammed the door, and dove into the front seat beside Mother. "Drive! Drive!" he yelled and the car lurched forward. Then almost at once he cried, "Slow down! Wait till we're out of town!"

Richard huddled in the back seat, his mind a jumble of dire, confused thoughts of some unspeakable calamity. The cry finally burst from his lips:

"Where's Daddy?"

"Later," Uncle Bob replied.

"But where is he? What happened? You said he'd be with you!"

"Something went wrong."

Mother didn't say a word, and only when they were out of town and picking up speed did Richard hear her crying. He knew that something terrible had happened and he wasn't going to see his father. Still, he was too numb with shock to frame another question. He was afraid of being told the truth.

As the car slowed at an intersection, he peered out and a sign leaped into view, an arrow pointing off into the darkness and the words: STATE PRISON.

Richard lost track of time long before they reached the Interstate. As if giving way before an endless bombardment of shocks and sorrows, his mind took refuge in sleep.

Only once thereafter, while it was still dark, did he half awaken, dimly conscious of rain drumming against the car windows and the low murmur of the radio. But he was still too drugged with sleep to make sense of what he heard.

"—was shot to death by a guard while attempting to escape. He had been threatening for weeks to break out. The mother of one of the guards became suspicious when she recognized a photograph of the prisoner and alerted her son—"

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The words droned on but only the word "photograph" sparked an image in Richard's brain as he drifted more deeply into the comforting darkness of sleep, and like the fragment of a dream he remembered the scrap of photograph, Daddy's face imprisoned perhaps forever in the small dark coffin of a bureau drawer. And as in a dream he heard the voice of a stranger, some lonely friendless traveler asking: What is your name? When were you here? Where did you come from and where were you going?

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

A NECESSARY EVIL

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

I am a person who is willin'
To state the merits of the villain,
Without whose fundamental mores
There'd be few thrilling mystery stories.
This perpetrator is essential
To circumstances consequential.
His cunning plans cause plots to thicken;
His devilish deeds make pulses quicken;
His motives and his methods vary,
Deceiving the constabulary.
He victimizes friend or stranger,
Creates suspense, intrigue, and danger.
Yet I perceive a contradiction
In pages of detective fiction,
For though the villain "makes" the story,
The hero garners all the glory.
But here's the truth—one cannot shun it—
If there's no doer, there's no whodunit.

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a *NEW* short story by

PETER LOVESEY

Doing the belly dance at the summer fair was for charity—the old folk, Angela explained: "You like old people, don't you?" As a matter of fact, "the lovely Yasmin" did . . .

KEEPING FIT

by PETER LOVESEY

This all happened through the Keep Fit class. I had been going for two years and by that time I was the mainstay of the class. I attended mainly for the company. After my divorce from Mike, I lived alone in Kingston, feeling sorry for myself. On Wednesday evenings I slipped into my black leotard and joined the human race again. There is definitely something therapeutic about exercise. I can recommend it to any woman living alone.

I had better confess to you that I enjoyed the classes for another reason too. I have a better than average figure. It used to boost my confidence no end to get envious glances from the other girls. We were all "girls" to each other, by the way, and "students" to the teacher although not one of us was under twenty-six. Some of the shapes that wobbled out of the changing-room at half past six on Wednesdays had to be seen to be believed, but we all got on together like a bunch of kids. Some of the heavier girls would tell me that they felt encouraged to do the exercises beside a trimmer figure. I'm not the owner of an especially pretty face, but my body is a winner. My legs were long enough to look lovely in the leotard. I have full, firm breasts, a smallish waist, and Mike—my "ex"—used to say I had the perkiest bottom in the whole of Surrey. From what I later learned, he was qualified to judge.

I was coming to the belly dancing. At seven-thirty, when the class

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was over, just to have a giggle, our teacher—Angela—would put on a record of Arabian music and we would all gyrate our hips like harem girls. It happens that I have excellent hip mobility, and the session would regularly end with everyone but me abandoning the attempt. They would form a ring around me and clap hands while I wiggled sensuously to the music. Fabulous. But I had no idea where it would lead.

One evening after I had done my party piece, Angela had a quiet word with me. She was a fine teacher—dignified, not matey—and we all respected her.

"Have you ever danced in public?" she asked.

"Like this, you mean?" I laughed. "Not likely."

"You're very good. You have the figure and the flexibility. With your dark hair and dreamy eyes, if you were dressed for the part you could convince anyone you were a proper belly dancer. I'll tell you why I mentioned it. My fellow, Duncan, is chairman of the summer fair this year and the Keep Fit students always give a demonstration. Well, Duncan sometimes meets me after class, and the other week he happened to be outside the window when you did your belly dance."

"Oh, how embarrassing!" I felt myself go crimson.

"No, he adored it. He was so impressed he came up with the idea of asking you to do a solo dance at the fair. We could dress you up in beads and chiffon and call you Yasmin the Belly Dancer and I guarantee you'd be the sensation of the fair. It's for charity, of course—the old folk. Would you do it?"

Naturally I made protesting sounds, but I allowed myself to be persuaded. I admit it: I was secretly delighted.

I had five weeks to prepare. Angela let me take the Arabian record home, and each night after work my flat became the Kasbah. At the weekend, I made my costume. By good fortune, I had a peach-colored bikini I had worn one holiday with Mike in the Canaries. The pants became the basis of the costume. With a few yards of matching chiffon, I made diaphanous harem-trousers fitting from the hips. I bought some satin in a similar shade and ran up the sweetest little bodice with short sleeves and a reckless plunge. Angela had given me a box of hundreds of tiny glass and gold beads, and I strung them together to make a headdress with a fringe. The rest I used to decorate the pants and bodice. With my black hair combed out and my eyes heavily made up to gaze mysteriously above the yashmak, I

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was almost ready. All it wanted was a pot of that stuff that gives you an overnight tan. Dusky bronze.

Two weeks before the fair, Angela invited me to dinner. It was a chance to let her see the costume. Duncan was also there—I got the impression he lived there, although it wasn't mentioned. He was some kind of foreman in a wholesale business, I gathered—an animated, vocal, not bad-looking guy, splendid for the chairman of the fair committee and probably just as capable in bed, but far too similar to Mike to interest me. He had the same irritating way of totally ignoring the things you said. While they cleared the table, I went into Angela's room and changed.

They adored the costume. Angela put on a record that was more Spanish than Arabian and I went through my dance, into which I introduced some extra and voluptuous movements, and they played besotted sheiks, cooing and shouting encouragement. We all finished helpless with amusement.

"Sensational! You're going to be the biggest attraction in the fair," said Duncan as he took my hand in his.

"*Prettiest* sounds better," said Angela. "I *love* the colors. How did you get that marvelous tan? I've got a few gold bangles I must give you. Wear them on your wrists and ankles and they'll show up beautifully against your skin."

"Do you know, I've had an idea!" said Duncan.

"I bet you have," said Angela.

"Seriously, Ange, it's a way of netting extra profit. After the belly dance, we announce an auction. Yasmin the Belly Dancer will perform in private at the place of the winner's choice."

I said at once, "I'm not sure if I like that."

"There's nothing to worry about. As the organizer, I'll see that it's all right. It's all for charity. Once I get the bidding going, I reckon I can get it up to fifty, with some of the stockbroker types around here."

"Fifty pounds would help the old folk quite a lot," said Angela. "Darling, it's just a dance. You like old people, don't you?"

As a matter of fact, I do. Older men, in my experience, have far more genuine charm than thrusting, self-assertive blokes like Mike or Duncan. "If you promise to come with me," I reluctantly agreed. I didn't fancy doing a private dance for some character with fantasies that he was King Farouk.

"You're on," said Duncan. "I'll see it gets top billing in the program. This will guarantee we get a record-breaking profit. The old

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people are going to be grateful to this year's fair committee, I can tell you."

"I can tell you how to earn some gratitude around here," said Angela with an unadmiring smile. "Wash the dishes while I help the lovely Yasmin out of her costume—and *no,* I won't switch jobs." When the bedroom door was closed, she told me, "I'll be glad when the damned thing is over. He talks of nothing else, even in bed. It's the first time he's been chairman of anything and he desperately wants a huge success."

"That's rather sweet," I said.

"It might help matters if he put some energy into his career. I've told him marriage is out of the question while he's still earning less than I do shouting at schoolgirls all day and flabby housewives in the evening. Sorry—nothing personal."

"You're right about marriage if that's the way you feel, Angela. You want to be sure before you take it on."

"I love him really, but it's no good making it too easy for them, is it? Let's find those bangles for you."

The program for the summer fair was dropped through my letter box two weeks before the date. Duncan had kept his promise: I was top of the bill. The wording was a bit excessive, I thought, but I suppose that's how you sell things.

3 P.M.—Recently Escaped from the Harem of a Sultan
YASMIN THE BELLY DANCER
You have heard of Eastern Promise—here is the PERFORMANCE
Admission 20 p. To be followed by a sensational
GRAND AUCTION OF THE LOVELY YASMIN
who agrees to dance in private at a date and place to be nominated by the highest bidder. Yasmin could be yours!

It certainly aroused some interest. The same afternoon, I had a call from Duncan. The local paper wanted to photograph me in my costume. Duncan was elated—it was marvelous publicity for the fair. I agreed, provided my name didn't appear.

I took my costume to the Keep Fit and they took my picture there. The girls were excited about it. I felt terribly self-conscious. Angela made them all work forty minutes over to rehearse the music and movement program for the fair. Because of the time it took me to get ready, I was not in the team this year.

Well, the fair was all Duncan could have wished. A brilliant day,

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every program sold and no problems with the sideshows. I'll be brief about my dancing, because it is secondary to the story. Let's say only that the large marquee was so packed with people that my space for dancing had to be reduced to a ten-foot square. They clapped and cheered and called out things I would be mortified to print. But not unflattering things. I gave them both sides of the 45 called *An Arabian Night.* I swayed and swiveled and jiggled my stomach until it ached. There was tumultuous applause.

Then a table was brought in. They stood me on it, still panting with the effort. Duncan stood on a chair to conduct the auction.

It was a revelation to me. The bidding started at ten pounds and rapidly got up to fifty. Then Duncan murmured to me to wriggle my hips again. That put the figure up to seventy. A rivalry developed between the local butcher and some lads in leather who seemed to have formed a syndicate. I didn't altogether like the idea of that, but at eighty pounds they reached their limit. The butcher bid eighty-five. Then Duncan held up a piece of paper.

"Ladies and gentlemen, a secret bidder has entered the auction. I have a bid of one hundred pounds. Do I hear one hundred and five?"

The butcher bleakly shook his head.

I was sold for a hundred pounds.

"Who is it?" I asked Duncan as soon as I got near him.

"It isn't clear, but here's the money in an envelope. The minute I find out I'll let you know."

I heard nothing for four days. I couldn't sleep for thinking of it. I was in quite a state: frightened, yes, a little—but excited too. Someone had paid a hundred pounds to have me dance for him. I considered all the affluent gentlemen of the district, from the scrap merchant to the Mayor. Who had I left out?

On Wednesday morning came a call from Duncan. The mysterious bidder had named a time and place. Saturday afternoon at an address in Esher. I asked Duncan who it was. He still didn't know. The message had been left for him. However, he would collect me in his car on Saturday and make sure everything was proper. He suggested that I put on the costume first and wear my raincoat over it.

That evening at the Keep Fit I asked Angela if she knew any more, but she was in the dark as well. She said the whole thing bored her now. I had a suspicion she was slightly peeved at Duncan sacrificing a Saturday afternoon he should have spent with her. She also made what I thought was a rather bitchy joke in the presence

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of the others, suggesting my new shoes were a present from the butcher.

Saturday was hot again. People were mowing lawns and cleaning cars along my street. I looked at my glittering seminaked image in the mirror and thought how bizarre this episode was. A car-horn sounded. I draped the raincoat around my shoulders, picked up my disc, and hurried out to Duncan's unexotic old Cortina.

"All set, my precious?"

I gave him a terse, "Yes." He would never have called me his precious when Angela was about and I wasn't certain that I liked it. Perhaps it was my state of nerves.

As we drove out of Kingston along the Portsmouth Road, his conversation made me increasingly uneasy.

"Super writeup in the local, wasn't it? I didn't think the picture did you justice. They should have had a full-length shot, in my opinion. Criminal not to show a gorgeous pair of legs like yours. Are you getting warm? You could slip the coat off now."

I kept it on. "Has this man been in touch again?" I asked him. "Do you know any more about him?"

"Nothing of importance. I think he must be some kind of rich recluse. It's a smart address."

We had gone through the town of Esher and past the race course. We took the road to Oxshott for about a mile and then turned left, along a shadowy, wooded lane.

"A little off the beaten track," said Duncan. "Barely a mile to go now."

I kept the raincoat tightly across my legs. I had a strong suspicion that Duncan had not been frank with me. He seemed to know exactly where he was taking me. Suppose there was no secret bidder other than himself? Suppose he had set me up for something? Like some frightened schoolgirl, I considered what to do if he stopped the car.

"Nervous?" he inquired. "I keep a flask of brandy in the glove compartment. Have a nip if you want."

"No, thanks."

"I could easily stop a minute."

"I'd rather get there and get it over."

A short way on, we came to an entrance with wrought-iron gates about ten foot high.

"This is it. Better get your yashmak on, my darling, while I open up."

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I had a girlish impulse to get out and run, but I wouldn't have got far in the satin mules I had put on for the journey, and the gravel would have cut my feet to shreds. I dutifully fixed on the yashmak.

"I'll leave them open in case we want to exit quickly," said Duncan with a laugh. He drove us through more trees to a mansion constructed in Bath stone almost covered in some kind of creeper. I was shivering.

"Better leave the coat behind," suggested Duncan as I got out.

I also took off the mules.

There was a bell, but Duncan didn't use it. He tried the handle. The door opened. He knew it would. At that moment I was certain he had tricked me. There was nobody inside.

I said, "We can't walk in like this."

"Why not? He knows we're coming." He pressed his hand against my back and firmly guided me inside. I felt it linger and I must have tensed, for he withdrew it.

The interior was dazzling, decorated like a Moorish palace: a carved wooden screen, illuminated windows, carpets of deepest red and gold, bejeweled scimitars and daggers ranged along one wall and tapestries along another.

But nobody came out to us.

"Duncan, what is this about?"

He winked. "Come upstairs. You'll see."

"No."

"All right. Wait here. Give me the record."

I passed it to him, still wondering whether to turn and run, but how, and where to, dressed like this? I comforted myself with the thought that if this *was* an elaborate plot to get me into bed, it was shaping up as more of a seduction than a rape. I still didn't fancy Duncan.

From upstairs came the strains of *An Arabian Night.*

"It's all right," called Duncan's voice, "he's here and waiting for you!" He was looking over the banisters.

"Upstairs?"

"Come on up."

"No. You come down."

"Very well." He joined me in the hall. "I don't believe you trust me. I'll tell you what. You go up and do your dance. I'll stay downstairs. There's a swimming pool round the back—you can see it from the window. I'll be there. Call down if you want me."

For the first time since I had entered the house, I considered the

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possibility that the secret bidder might actually be there. "Why does it have to be upstairs?"

"That's where the hi-fi is. He's bedridden, poor fellow. Go and give him his treat. He's really looking forward to it."

I suppose it was the familiarity of the music that finally drew me up the stairs. I was quivering inside. Out of the corner of an eye I watched Duncan cross the hall and go outside. He was not the seducer I had taken him for.

Halfway up the stairs was a niche containing an open box. Laid across it was a necklace of lapis lazuli. I was sure it was from ancient Egypt. I moved on.

The music was coming from behind the first door on the landing. It was just ajar. I considered whether to knock. It seemed inappropriate. I sidled to the door, paused, took a breath and moved inside, gyrating gently to the music.

It was a large paneled room, dominated by a single bed with the headboard outlined in the tulip shape so beloved of Eastern craftsmen. There was a small figure sitting in its center like a bee, an old man in a gold quilted smoking-jacket, white-bearded, bright-eyed, and smiling. He was waving his hands, keeping the music's beat.

I warmed to him. I danced.

I had hardly started when the rhythm broke. I hesitated. Then I saw the reason. The deck for the hi-fi was beside the old man's bed. He had lifted the playing arm and set the stylus back toward the beginning of the disc.

I gave him a roguish look. He beckoned with his hand and patted the bed beside him. I glanced out the window. Duncan was lying by the pool below. He had stripped to a pair of trunks.

I perched myself on the edge of the bed.

"What's he doing?" asked the old man in a surprisingly silky voice.

"Sun-bathing."

He smiled. "I'm not supposed to talk to you. The money was only for the dance."

"I don't mind."

"I like your dancing. I used to watch the Cairo belly dancers years ago, before the war. I was in the Embassy. Had most of my career out there. I often watched the belly dancing."

"Better than mine, I'm sure. I'm an impostor."

"A very acceptable one, my dear. Lovely to watch. Just a little at a time though. Blood-pressure. I lost my tablets a week ago—I can't find the pesky things however hard I look."

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"Can't you get some more?"

"I've got some coming. As a matter of fact, my housekeeper—she looks after me—is picking up the prescription this afternoon. Duncan promised, but I rather think he must have forgotten it."

"I see."

"Duncan's a brick, bringing you here like this. I'm his Uncle Norman, as I expect he told you."

"No."

"Didn't he? He's absent-minded sometimes. Still, he's the only family I have. He takes a lot of interest. He'll inherit all this when I go. How's the needle going?"

I stretched across to move it back. Uncle Norman watched me and went visibly more pink.

He said, "What a state I'm in. I wish I could find those wretched tablets."

"Shall I look for them?"

"No use, my dear. Duncan searched the room from top to bottom yesterday afternoon. I'll be all right as long as I don't get too excited. Doctor's orders. Tablets keep the pressure down, you see. Duncan says I can take the dancing in my stride, but I know my ticker better than he does."

I heard all this with mounting horror. I could have killed Uncle Norman with the belly dance. He knew it and I was damned sure Duncan knew it.

I got up.

"Where are you going, my dear? Don't go yet."

"I'd like to find the bathroom."

"Oh. Along the passage. Last door facing you. Come back, won't you?"

I ran downstairs. Through the open door I glimpsed a second car beside our own. The housekeeper's, I presumed. It didn't matter. I was incensed. I was going to have this out with Duncan. I could see it all: the old man forever reminiscing about his Cairo belly dancers; Duncan spying on me at the Keep Fit; the fair; the auction; the missing tablets. It was tantamount to murder. And Duncan would inherit this enormous house and all its treasures and marry Angela. For all her reservations about men, she'd have him at the altar like a shot.

He was still lying on his stomach.

"Duncan."

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He turned and sat up. "Something wrong?" He didn't look too concerned.

I said, "Is this what you expected?"

He stood up.

I said, "You bastard. You tried to kill him."

Duncan said, "What happened? Is he having an attack? We're in this together. You'd better tell me."

"He's your uncle. You're his heir. You didn't tell me."

"So what? I didn't tell Angela either. It's my business."

"You fixed the auction."

Duncan grabbed my wrist. "I've had enough of this. You and I are going upstairs to see what's happened."

"No!"

He started pulling me along.

"Leave me alone!"

"If he's alive, you can damned well do your belly dance until you drop or he does. Move yourself!" He slapped me hard across the face.

We reached the house. I screamed. He dragged me across the hall, twisting my arm behind me. Stair by stair he forced me upward, his bare legs thrusting against mine.

"Let me go!" I screamed. "Let me *go!*"

At the top of the stairs, I grabbed the rail and tried to kick him.

Suddenly he released me and gave an appalling shriek. What I saw amazed me. His chest was spurting blood. There was a dagger in it, one of those ornamental daggers from the hall with vicious curved blades.

Angela had stabbed him. She was facing him and screaming at his face, "I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!"

Duncan lurched forward. Angela pushed him back. Her vocation made her very strong. Duncan fell backward down the stairs. He did not move again. The post-mortem showed a broken neck.

Angela reached out and held me. We clung to each other, overcome by what had happened. She said between sobs, "I always knew he fancied you. I followed you in the car. I knew what he was planning, knew it, *knew* it!" She was hysterical again.

Of course, she didn't know it. She killed the man who loved her, would have gotten rich and married her. She got two years in Holloway to ruminate on that. She's still there.

And Uncle Norman? He survived the shock. He's doing well. He takes his tablets and gets a lot of pleasure twice a week watching his wife belly dancing for him to *An Arabian Night.*

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

When Charlie Weston suggested that Nick had stolen the furniture from Douglas Shelton's Maryland home, Nick reminded him that he never stole anything of value.

"There's always a first time," Charlie said. "Maybe the recession has forced you to be less fussy."

"It hasn't," Nick replied grimly. But who knew what the competition of Sandra Paris—the White Queen—would lead to?

A new challenge for Nick Velvet, whose challenges get curiouser and curiouser . . .

THE THEFT OF THE WHITE QUEEN'S MENU

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet first heard the White Queen mentioned as he was dining at one of the flashy Boardwalk casinos in Atlantic City. Across the table from him sat Rooster Vitale, a minor organized-crime figure who'd employed Nick's special talents more than once in the past.

"Have your assignments been falling off lately?" he asked Nick through a mouthful of duck.

"Not especially. I have all the work I want."

Vitale grunted. "I thought maybe the White Queen was cutting in on your territory."

"Who?"

"Sandra Paris. She calls herself the White Queen." Rooster fished into his vest pocket and produced a business card he passed over to Nick. It read simply:

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THE WHITE QUEEN

Impossible Things Before Breakfast

There was a New York telephone number printed in the lower left corner.

"This is the first I've heard of her," Nick admitted. "What does she do?"

Rooster Vitale shrugged. "The same sort of impossible things you do, only she doesn't have your scruples about what she steals."

"I'll have to meet her sometime," Nick murmured, finishing his dinner and signaling the waiter for coffee. "Now let's get down to business. What can I do for you this time, Rooster?"

The stout man reached for his wine glass. "I want you to steal a roomful of furniture."

"Stop right there, Rooster. You know I don't steal anything of value."

"Hell, Nick, it's not like it was diamonds or bonds or a shipment of cocaine! This is just furniture! It's in the study of a guy's house down in Maryland. You could—"

"Sorry, Rooster, you know my rule. No money, jewelry, paintings, nothing of value. I've made a reputation, and a good living, stealing only worthless items. I don't intend to change now. A roomful of furniture is out of my line."

"You won't reconsider?"

"I can't."

"All right then," Rooster said sadly. "I'll have to look elsewhere."

"Who will you get?" Nick asked curiously.

"The White Queen, I suppose."

Douglas Shelton was a Baltimore attorney who knew how to live the good life. At fifty-five he was a senior partner in a firm that did a good deal of business with the local and state governments. He lived with his wife Angela in a fine old house near the shore of Chesapeake Bay. Their two children were doing well in college, and with time to themselves Doug and Angela had begun to travel more. She was ten years younger than Doug, a still beautiful woman who took pride in their home and the circle of influential friends in which they moved.

Shelton often worked at home, especially when the winter winds off the Bay brought snow or a chill temperature that made the long drive to his law firm in downtown Baltimore a less than pleasant experience. He'd converted an enclosed back porch into a private

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study with a desk, bookshelves, and filing cabinets, and made it so handsome that even the woman who'd come through to photograph the house recently for a national magazine and had seen some exquisite rooms had been especially impressed by it.

This morning in April, awakening from a deep sleep, Douglas Shelton's first thought was that he was alone in the wide king-sized bed. That was unusual and it took him a moment to clear his mind of sleep and remember that Angela had gone off to a parents' weekend at their daughter's college. A court appearance had kept Shelton from accompanying her. He opened one eye and could tell from the dim light that it was somewhere just after six. He thought he heard a noise downstairs, but decided it must be his imagination.

He slid out from beneath the covers and stretched, thinking he should fix himself some breakfast before driving into the city for his eleven o'clock court appearance. He went into the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and trod downstairs in his pajamas. Passing the open door of his study, he glanced in at the dim outlines of his furniture in the weak morning light, then continued on to the kitchen. He took some oranges from the refrigerator and started squeezing them.

After a few minutes the telephone rang.

Who would be calling him at 6:15 in the morning? Angela, perhaps? He picked up the wall phone in the kitchen. "Hello?"

"Douglas Shelton?" a woman's soft voice asked.

"Speaking."

"Take a look at your study, Mr Shelton."

"What?"

The line went dead.

He grunted and replaced the phone, then retraced his steps through the dining and living rooms to the door of the study. Though he'd seen it only a few minutes earlier, it looked different now.

It looked empty!

He snapped on the overhead light and stared with unbelieving eyes. His desk, chair, bookcases, filing cabinet, sofa, and lamps, even the rug on the floor, were gone. The room was completely bare.

In the few minutes while he'd been preparing breakfast, someone had stolen all the furniture from his study.

The robbery at Douglas Shelton's home took place just three weeks after Nick Velvet's luncheon with Rooster Vitale, and when Nick spotted the item in the back pages of the New York newspaper he knew that Rooster had found someone to pull off his theft. Probably

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it had been the White Queen, and that bothered Nick the way successful competition always bothered a businessman.

"What's the matter, Nicky?" Gloria asked him over breakfast.

"Business. It's been a bit slow this month."

"It'll pick up."

He nodded, finishing his coffee. "Maybe I'll make a few phone calls."

The first person he called was Rooster Vitale in Atlantic City. "What happened with that furniture job you had?"

"It's taken care of, Nick. Sorry."

"I didn't want to do it. I'm just curious."

"The White Queen handled it. She did a neat job too. Maybe you saw it in the papers."

"I think I did."

"She's good, Nick. You better watch yourself or you'll be out of business."

"Thanks, Rooster."

Nick hung up and tried to forget about it. But the nagging memory remained with him. Now he had competition where there had been none before. He spent the following day learning what he could about Sandra Paris. She was a woman in her mid-thirties who'd turned to crime following a brief and unsuccessful career as an actress. Nick hunted out her picture in *The Times* and some show-business publications and was struck by the innocent beauty of her pale face, framed in platinum-blonde hair. Staring hard at the picture, he determined to meet her.

"Where can I find the White Queen?" He asked Rooster Vitale on the telephone.

"Hell, Nick, don't involve me in any feud."

"No feud, Rooster. I just want to meet the lady."

"The only time I ever see her is at breakfast. When she has an assignment she likes to finish it early and eat a big breakfast around ten o'clock."

"Impossible things before breakfast."

"What?"

"I was just quoting her motto. Where's her base—that New York phone number?"

"She moves around. That's just an answering service. I happen to know she's back in Atlantic City right now, on another assignment."

"For you?"

He hesitated. "Well, yeah."

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"What?"

"You know I can't tell you, Nick. But chances are you'll find her having breakfast at the King's Fountain either tomorrow morning or the day after. Don't say I sent you."

"Thanks, Rooster."

She didn't show on the following morning. Nick managed to drink three cups of coffee while waiting, but by eleven-thirty he gave up and left. He spent the rest of the day gambling away small sums at the blackjack tables and wondering if he was wasting his time by staying over in Atlantic City for another night. A fierce April rainstorm was pelting the city from the ocean, confining his gaming to the mirrored luxury of the King's Fountain casino. He began to speculate about a scheme to cover over the Boardwalk and allow patrons access to other casinos in bad weather. It was a problem Las Vegas never had to face.

A voice he vaguely knew said, "Hello, Nick," and interrupted his thoughts. He turned to see Charlie Weston glaring down at him.

"Hello, Charlie. Long time no see."

Weston was an ex-cop who'd crossed Nick's path two or three times during the past fifteen years. He knew what Nick did for a living, and he was an honest man. The two taken together made him dangerous. He'd sworn on more than one occasion to put Nick behind bars. "What are you after in Atlantic City?" the big man asked, his meaty hand descending on Nick's shoulder.

"Just down for a little gambling. What about you?"

"I'm chief of security at the King's Fountain. My job is to protect the place from people like you, Nick."

"I never turned a crooked card in my life, Charlie. You know that." Nick was seated at a cocktail table for two and motioned toward the empty chair. "Sit down. I'll buy you a drink."

Weston sat down but waved away the offer. "I'm on duty. I suppose you are too."

"I'm not here to steal anything, Charlie. You have my word on that."

"I saw you here last month having dinner with Rooster Vitale. A few weeks later some evidence linking him to a bribery attempt in Maryland was stolen from a man named Shelton. All the furniture in Shelton's study was taken because Vitale wasn't sure where the incriminating papers were hidden. That sounds like your sort of caper, Nick."

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"You know I never steal anything of value. Furniture has value."

"There's always a first time. Maybe the recession has forced you to be less fussy."

"It hasn't," Nick replied grimly. "I know nothing about the theft of Douglas Shelton's furniture."

"But you know his first name, don't you? And I hadn't mentioned it."

Nick silently cursed his slip-up. There was something about Charlie Weston that had always unnerved him. "I know nothing about it," he repeated. "I probably saw the name in the newspaper."

"Well, I'll tell you something about it. Rooster Vitale has always operated on the fringes of the organized-crime families. We know he was involved in bribing some Congressmen and state officials both here and in Maryland. Douglas Shelton, an attorney involved in some of the payoffs, had a number of papers that would incriminate Vitale hidden in his study. Since Rooster didn't know exactly where they were hidden, he had every stick of furniture stolen—even the rug on the floor. Shelton claims it was done in about five minutes, while he was squeezing oranges for breakfast."

"*I* didn't do it," Nick insisted. "It's not my sort of job."

Charlie Weston stood up. "We don't want trouble in our casino, Nick. We don't want Rooster Vitale or Nick Velvet hanging around. Understand?"

"I plan to leave tomorrow," Nick replied. Weston nodded and walked away.

Nick had barely reached the lobby the following morning when he heard the reports of The White Queen's latest escapade. Shortly before four, someone had stolen a roulette wheel from an unused gaming table at the Golden Fleece casino down the Boardwalk. Since the casino was open at the time, no one could imagine how the thieves had struck without being seen. The wheel had simply disappeared from the top of the table, leaving it bare.

She was already eating breakfast when he entered the dining room.

He walked over to her table and asked, "May I join you for coffee?"

She looked up, smiling the same enticing smile as in the newspaper photograph. An innocent beauty, caught between her toast and coffee. "I don't believe we've been introduced."

"My name is Nick Velvet."

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"I know your name. I said I don't believe we've been introduced. Mr. Velvet."

"It's time we were," he said, pulling out the chair opposite her to sit down. "I hear you've had an active morning."

She arched an eyebrow at him but did not take the bait. Instead she said simply, "I slept late. Are you in the habit of asking personal questions, Mr. Velvet?"

For just an instant he wondered if Rooster could have steered him wrong. Perhaps she really was as innocent as she acted. Then he decided to plunge on. "You're cutting into my business, Miss Paris. I thought it was time we talked."

The waiter interrupted to take his order for coffee, and when he faced her again she said, "I understood that you were in a slightly different line of work. I don't bother myself with items of no value, like postcards and teabags."

"You're more familiar with me than I'd supposed. Who paid you to take the wheel this morning? Vitale?"

"Do you really expect me to answer that? You could be wearing a wire and recording every word."

"I don't work for the police."

"You were at a table with Weston, the casino security chief, yesterday."

"My, my—you have been keeping tabs on me. I'm sorry I didn't notice you."

"People rarely do, unless I smile. They think I'm in town for the librarians' convention."

"Tell me about Douglas Shelton's furniture."

"That," she said softly, "is a very sore subject."

"Oh? How well do you know Rooster Vitale?"

"Well enough. I've done some jobs for him." She lowered her voice still further and leaned across the table. "He hasn't paid me yet."

"It's usually cash on delivery," Nick said.

"Yes. Well—" She seemed about to say more, but changed her mind.

"Do you always eat a big breakfast after a job?"

"I suppose it's become my trademark." She passed him one of the cards he'd already seen. *Impossible Things Before Breakfast.* "Remember the White Queen in *Through the Looking Glass?* 'Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.' Well, I don't believe them, but I do them."

"Including the wheel this morning?"

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She shrugged. "A simple little job."

"I hear it vanished with the casino full of people. You don't walk out the door with a roulette wheel under your arm and not attract attention."

The smile was back. "Someday I'll let you in on the secret, Mr. Velvet, but for now you needn't worry. I hope to be out of here in another day or so, heading for the West Coast. We won't be competitors then."

"I'm glad to hear it. But I admit a fondness for postcards and teabags. Furniture and roulette wheels are a bit out of my line, though I'll venture to say I could duplicate any one of your feats if I had to."

"Is that a challenge?"

"No, no. Let's part friends. I've enjoyed it, Miss Paris."

He rose to leave, but suddenly Sandra Paris seemed to make a decision. "Come stroll on the Boardwalk with me, where we can't be overheard."

"Gladly."

He let her pay for his coffee and then followed her across the hotel lobby to the Boardwalk entrance. The doors slid open automatically as they approached and then they were out in the morning air, breathing in the April warmth. "At least the rain has stopped," she commented. "We might have a decent day for a change."

"Looks like it."

She turned to him suddenly and said, "I need your help."

"Oh?"

"Rooster Vitale won't pay my fee until I deliver some papers he wants."

"That's between you and Rooster."

"But I know they're hidden in that furniture from Shelton's study. All I have to do is find them."

"That shouldn't be hard."

"But it is! I've taken the stuff apart piece by piece!"

"Maybe you've been double-crossed. You must have people working for you. One of them could have found the papers without letting you know."

She shook her head. "No, they've never been alone with the furniture."

"I don't find things," he said. "I steal them."

"What's your fee—twenty-five thousand?"

"That's right."

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"I'll pay you that to steal the papers from their hiding place in the furniture and give them to me. It's easy money—no risk involved."

"Do I get to learn how you stole it all while Shelton was squeezing his orange juice?"

"Oh, no. That's not part of the agreement."

"I take a fee only for stealing valueless items. Those papers sound pretty valuable to me."

"Then do it as a professional favor. I'll owe you one, Mr. Velvet."

It was very hard resisting her smile. "You can call me Nick," he said.

They drove in her white Cadillac to a small warehouse west of the city. "I rented space here," Sandra explained. "Two men I've used before helped with the actual theft, but I trust them completely."

They entered the storage area and Nick was startled by the sight. Desk, sofa, chairs, filing cabinets—all but the rug had been reduced to rubble in a futile attempt to find the papers. "What do you think? Where haven't I looked?"

"Behind the pictures on the walls?"

"There were no pictures. The study was on an enclosed porch with big windows on three sides covered with roll-down blinds."

"The papers were rolled up in one of the blinds," he suggested.

"No, we've got them here someplace. And they're not in the filing cabinets. I've looked at every sheet of paper in every drawer."

"Maybe they were never in the study."

She shook her head. "He's frantic to get this stuff back."

"He won't be so frantic when he sees the condition it's in."

"He's not going to see—" She paused and stared at him. "Nick, are we thinking the same thing?"

"Could be," he answered with a grin. He was starting to like Sandra Paris. "If we can't find those papers, maybe Shelton can find them for us."

An hour later, after they'd talked it through, Nick phoned Shelton at his Baltimore law office. "Mr. Shelton, you don't know me but I have some information about your missing furniture."

"What? Where is it?"

"How much is it worth to get it back?"

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There was silence for a moment. Then Shelton answered, "Five hundred dollars might be a reasonable reward."

"Double that and we'll talk business."

"Very well," he replied without hesitation. "Where is the furniture?"

"At a warehouse near Atlantic City. Can you drive up here this afternoon?"

"I suppose so. Give me the address."

"No," Nick said. "I'll meet you nearby." He gave the location of a fast-food restaurant in a shopping center on Route 322. "Meet me there at two o'clock with the money."

"How will I know you?"

"Don't worry. I'll know you."

Shelton arrived ten minutes early for the meeting. He was a stout, balding man who looked exactly like his newspaper photos. When Nick was reasonably certain he hadn't been tailed, he stepped up and made the contact. "Mr. Shelton? I'm the man who called you."

Shelton stared at him as if trying to memorize his face. "You're Mr.—?"

"The name's not important. Did you bring the money?"

"You'll get it when I see the furniture."

"All right," Nick agreed. "Let's go."

As they drove to the warehouse, the lawyer said, "But why? Why steal it in the first place? I never heard of anyone holding a roomful of furniture for ransom."

"I wasn't in on the robbery," Nick admitted. "That was my partner. I just want to get rid of the stuff." He turned into the warehouse parking lot.

"Is this the place?"

"Yeah."

Nick led him through the side door and unlocked the room Sandra had rented. He let the lawyer enter first. "My God!" Shelton gasped as Nick turned on the overhead light.

"Things got a little messed up on the trip."

Shelton hurried to the rug and Nick could see him testing the thick binding at the edge of it with his shoe. Then he looked at Nick seemingly satisfied. "This is all junk. You can't expect me to pay you for this."

"I thought you'd be happy to get your papers back," Nick said.

"Let me gather up a few things and you can take me back to my

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car. I'll take the rug and some of my files. You can keep the rest and I'll collect on the insurance."

Nick helped him carry the rug out to the car and then waited while the attorney went through his scattered files and pulled out more than a score of fat folders. "You can't expect me to pay for the rest of this," Shelton said again.

"Let's make it five hundred," Nick offered, shifting uneasily.

"Look, I've got your license number. You could be in big trouble," Shelton told him, responding to Nick's tone.

They drove back to the restaurant in silence and Nick helped Shelton move the rolled-up rug and file folders into his own car. As he was about to depart, the lawyer handed him a fifty-dollar bill. "Take this and be glad you're not in jail." Then he slid behind the wheel and drove off without another glance at Nick.

As his car disappeared from view, Sandra came out of the restaurant. "You look pleased with yourself, Nick. How'd it go?"

"Perfect. The papers were on microfilm, hidden in the binding of the rug. I removed it while he was sorting through his files. Here you are." He handed over the small strip of film.

She grinned and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "You know something? We'd make a pretty terrific pair."

They dined together that evening in the plush Guard Room at the King's Fountain. Over coffee she announced, "When I collect my money from Rooster Vitale I'm cutting you in for a share."

"That isn't necessary. I did it as a favor." He returned her smile. "After all, I'm anxious to get the competition out of town."

"You're not interested in teaming up?"

He thought of Gloria, waiting back home. "Not really. I've always worked best alone."

"I'm getting fifty thousand from Vitale," she told him.

"My regular fee is only half that."

"I know." She lit a cigarette. "Maybe I can subcontract some work to you. Do you have any suggestions?"

He shrugged. "I could steal your menu at breakfast some morning. Rob you of your celebration."

"I'll remember that and keep a tight grip on it. You steal it out of my hands and I'll pay you twenty-five thousand."

"It's a deal," he agreed, joining her laughter. They were both being silly, and he enjoyed it immensely. "Have you talked to Rooster yet?"

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She nodded. "I'm meeting him after dinner. I told him on the phone I had what he wanted."

"Then I guess you'll be headed west."

"I could be tempted to stay."

"Don't tempt me to tempt you."

As they were leaving she said, "You know my room number, if you want to stop by after I see Vitale."

He spent the next hour randomly playing the casino slot machines. It was a crowded, noisy night, with busloads of evening gamblers down from New York and Philadelphia. After a while he strolled along the Boardwalk to the casino where the roulette wheel had been stolen. The bare table was no longer there. A guard told him it had been removed during the day by a storage company.

Nick had learned a great deal about Sandra Paris in the day he'd known her, but he felt he'd learned very little about her alter ego, The White Queen. He still didn't know how she'd stolen the furniture from Shelton's home or the roulette wheel from a busy casino. Maybe it would be worth teaming up with her just to learn how.

Maybe it would be worth a visit to her room, at least.

Nick strolled back along the Boardwalk to the King's Fountain, knowing he was being drawn to the woman like a fly to a honeyed web.

As he entered the lobby of the hotel, he was intercepted by Rooster Vitale. "Nick, I gotta talk to you."

"Right now?"

"Right now. Let's go have a drink."

Nick ordered a glass of wine and joined Rooster in the lounge. "What's the trouble? You look upset."

"That damned White Queen messed me up on the furniture deal."

"How could that be? I thought she found what you wanted today."

"You know about it, huh? She was supposed to find some papers for me. Instead she comes up with microfilm copies of them."

"Why isn't that good enough?"

"Hell, Nick—the papers are incriminating! I need the originals!"

"I see. Then you haven't paid Sandra her money?"

"Damn right I haven't paid her! She brings me the microfilm and tells me she gave the rest of everything back to Shelton."

"*I* gave it back, Rooster. I was helping Sandra. Whatever happened is my fault."

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"Hell, Nick, I asked you to help me with this and you refused. Now you tell me you're the one that botched the job."

"You'd better explain what's involved. Just what are these papers?"

Rooster Vitale sighed and looked around as if seeking a way out. Finally he lowered his voice and said, "There were several letters and a typed contract. About ten years ago, before gambling was legal in Atlantic City, I was involved in a string of private clubs in Jersey and Maryland. You know what I mean—we had a few games in the back room for high rollers who didn't want to go all the way to Vegas for action. Shelton set up a dummy corporation for us, and those letters and the contract are my only link to it. Now I'm trying to go legit, to get into one of the casino corporations here. But Shelton's been blackmailing me, threatening to tell the State Gaming Commission about my past involvements. The White Queen stole all his study furniture to be sure of getting all the papers, but all she delivered was the microfilm."

"Maybe that's all there was."

Rooster shook his head. "Shelton phoned me an hour ago from home and boasted about getting the papers back."

"That's impossible! All he took back was the rug and a couple of dozen file folders. Sandra had been through every paper in them without finding what you wanted."

"All I know is what he told me, Nick. The problem is, what do I do now?"

"Tell me something, Rooster—did you also hire Sandra to steal the roulette wheel from the Golden Fleece?"

"She told you about that too, huh?"

"No, she didn't. But you told me she was doing another job for you."

"It was a wheel I sold to the Fleece when they first opened up," Rooster mumbled. "They needed equipment in a hurry. I decided I wanted it back. They weren't using it much any more."

"Was it rigged?"

"No. I've never run a crooked wheel, Nick."

"But you needed it stolen. Somehow it tied in with those papers, didn't it?"

"I can't go into all that."

"But you want my help."

"Can you get those letters and the contract?"

"You mean rob Douglas Shelton a second time?"

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"Sure. Why not? I'll pay double your usual fee."

"Those papers have value now, Rooster. They're blackmail material. You know I can't take money for that."

"Hell, Nick, come down to earth! Either you're a thief or you're not!"

"Let me think about it, Rooster."

"I got only one alternative, Nick. If you won't do it, I'll send a couple of guys to his house with a firebomb. That'll finish the papers and Shelton both at once."

For some reason the words shocked Nick. He'd known Rooster a long time, and knew what he was, but the idea of murder had never crossed his mind in connection with Rooster. Maybe Shelton didn't deserve saving, but he didn't deserve killing either.

"All right," he said. "But if I do it it's as a favor to you—I'll take no money for it."

"You gotta be paid, Nick."

"Give Sandra her money. I'll settle with her."

"Then I can count on you?"

Nick, who never thought he'd end up robbing a man to save the man's life, replied, "You can count on me."

Douglas Shelton awakened suddenly, wondering if he heard something downstairs. It was still early and his wife Angela was fast asleep at this side. The first faint glow of dawn was just beginning to outline the windows behind their draperies.

Remembering the morning he'd been robbed, he slipped silently out of bed, taking with him the .38-caliber revolver he kept handy now. All was dim and silent downstairs and as he passed the study door he looked in at the shadowed shapes of the new furniture already in place.

"Stand still, please," a voice from the study said. "And hand me that gun."

"What—?"

"Please. I don't want to shoot you."

A hand reached out of the darkness to grab the gun and Shelton saw the familiar face from the Atlantic City warehouse. "What do you want? How'd you get in here?"

"Getting in was easy. Those study windows are simple to open. And I think you know what I want. The files you took yesterday."

"Those are my private papers."

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"Let's not waste time. You may not believe this, but I'm trying to save your life."

"With that gun?"

"Yes."

Shelton hesitated. The man's eyes were hard and businesslike, yet somehow Shelton believed him. "Very well," he said. "Ever since that girl photographed my house for the magazine I've had nothing but robberies. And the pictures haven't even appeared yet."

"Maybe I can do something to have them cancelled if you take me to those folders right now."

Shelton sighed and led the way to one of the new filing cabinets. "What makes you think you'll find anything this time when you didn't find anything before?"

"Because this time I know what I'm looking for," Nick Velvet said.

It was nearly ten-thirty when Sandra Paris settled down to breakfast at the King's Fountain. She was still studying the big gray menu when Nick walked in and took the chair opposite her. "Another celebration?" he asked.

She smiled, happy to see him again. "I was expecting you last night."

"I made no promises. And after I saw Rooster I figured you might not be in the mood for visitors."

"That's all settled. He paid me this morning. That's why I'm celebrating. Did you have anything to do with it, Nick?"

"A bit," he admitted.

"*Were* those papers in the batch I stole?"

"Yes."

"But how could they have been? I looked over every one!"

"I'll tell you that after you let me in on some of *your* secrets—how you stole the furniture and the roulette wheel, for instance."

"Are we partners, then?" She put down the menu and rested her folded hands on it.

"I'm no good at partners," Nick told her honestly. "And I think I know how you stole the furniture. I happened to see Douglas Shelton again this morning, and he mentioned a woman photographer who took pictures of his house for a national publication. He said the pictures hadn't appeared yet. They haven't appeared because *you* were the photographer, Sandra. You not only got the layout of the house while posing as a photographer, you also took a wide-angle photo of his study from the doorway. You blew up a print to

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life size and mounted it, probably on a large window shade, and placed it in the doorway of the study, blocking a view of the room and giving the impression, in dim light, that the furniture was still in place.

"You and some helpers worked quietly through the night, removing the furniture through those big porch windows. When Shelton finally heard something toward morning and came down for breakfast, you'd just about finished. He glanced at the study doorway but noticed nothing wrong. You rolled up the photo and left through the window while he was squeezing his orange juice, then you phoned him from down the road."

"You figured that out all by yourself?" she said, the irony of her tone not quite hiding a hint of admiration.

"Want me to tell you about the roulette wheel next?"

"Don't tell me you've solved that one too!"

"In a way it was one of the cleverest robberies I've come across. You simply walked up to the unused wheel in a casino full of people, waited until no one was looking your way, and pressed a hidden button that made the wheel drop inside the specially constructed table. It remained there until your men picked it up yesterday and took it to the warehouse."

"You're guessing now," she said, but her eyes had turned uncertain.

"It's a guess, but a knowledgeable one. Rooster told me he ran a string of illegal gambling houses in New Jersey some years back and that the roulette wheel at the Golden Fleece came from one of those houses. He needed it stolen so his past wouldn't accidentally come to light now that he's trying to get a legitimate gaming license. If the table came from an illegal house, I have a hunch it was gimmicked to look like an ordinary table when not in use. Of course, anyone could have pressed the hidden button to *hide* the wheel, but he needed your skill in removing the supposedly bare table from the casino later. That's when the real theft took place. Luckily for both of you, the people on duty at the casino never knew it was a gimmicked table. When a couple of workmen showed up with a truck, they let it go."

"All right," she admitted. "Suppose that's all true. It just proves you're a better detective than a thief, Nick."

"I'm still a pretty good thief. I got those papers back from Shelton," he reminded her.

"Are you going to tell me where they were?"

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"Sure. You checked through all those papers, looking for the letters and contract Rooster described to you, but naturally you looked only at the *front* of the sheets. Shelton simply typed other, innocuous memos on the backs of the incriminating letters and contract and put them in his file with the back side up."

"But what did you get out of all this?" she asked, obviously miffed. "Did Rooster pay you?"

Nick shook his head. "The papers had value as blackmail. I don't steal anything of value. I took them to save a life, not for gain. Rooster's not paying me, you are."

"What?"

"Twenty-five thousand for stealing your menu—remember?"

"But my menu is right—" She picked it up and stared at it, then turned it over in her hands. The menu itself was gone. What she held was a blank piece of gray cardboard.

She sighed. "Damn it, Nick, you're always a jump ahead of me. I wish we could be partners." Then she reached for her checkbook.

"Cash would be better," he said quietly. "From the fifty Rooster gave you this morning."

By noon Nick had his suitcase packed and was ready to leave the hotel. When the knock came at his door he thought it might be the bellman. But it was Charlie Weston.

"You're leaving, are you, Nick?" he asked.

"I told you I would be."

"I thought you might want to know the police just arrested a couple of friends of yours—Rooster Vitale and Sandra Paris."

"I know the names," Nick admitted, trying not to show his surprise. "But I wouldn't exactly call them friends."

"We got them for stealing the roulette wheel out of the Golden Fleece. What do you think of that?"

"A crazy sort of a crime."

"Yeah. For a while I thought it was so crazy we might hang it on you, Nick. But no such luck. Turns out the wheel was hidden inside the table all along. A couple of guys picked it up yesterday at the casino and we traced the truck they were driving to a warehouse out on 322. I worked with the Fleece security men on it. The warehouse room had been rented by a woman we identified as Sandra Paris, and this morning we got films of Rooster Vitale paying her off. That's when we called in the local police."

"How does this concern me?"

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Weston chewed nervously at his lower lip. "I don't exactly know. If I did, you'd be in a cell with them. We know you were out of town somewhere overnight, and when you came back early this morning you had a printer run off a copy of our breakfast menu done in disappearing ink that would fade after an hour or so. You slipped the hostess downstairs twenty bucks to give Sandra Paris that menu when she came in. Why'd you do that?"

Nick Velvet shrugged. "A practical joke. Last week was April Fools' Day."

The security man grunted. "Sandra Paris had only twenty-five thousand on her, but Rooster says he paid her fifty. You wouldn't happen to have the balance?"

"If you've got a search warrant you can find out."

They eyed each other until Weston finally looked away. "Go on, get out of here, Nick. Next time you won't be so lucky."

Nick thought about The White Queen all the way home, and he wondered what the penalty was for stealing a roulette wheel in New Jersey.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

VELVET VALUES

by J. ABBOTT

Said Gloria, "I'm furious
Whenever I think about this:
Nick said he takes just worthless things
On the night he stole his first kiss."

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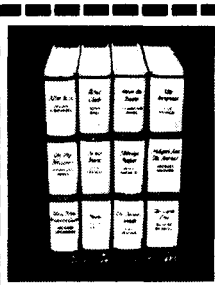

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by JAMES HOLDING

Here lies golfer "Bogey" Tallfer,
An ardent, dedicated golfer,
Who, since he was inept as well,
Cheated in order to excel.
Thus, when he'd miss the ball he'd sing,
"That was just a practice swing!"
And every hole, when he would make
Some unbelievable mistake—
Like swing too fast or grip all wrong
Or hit it fat or hit it long,
Or shank it into shamed retreat
Or take three putts from seven feet—
He'd always claim he *almost* parred
And mark a bogey on his card.
This cheating to attain his ends
Estranged his partners and his friends,
Who vowed to stay away from him
And nevermore to play with him,
Whereon, in desolation utter,
He brained himself with a gooseneck putter
And now lies here, his golfing done—
This hole, at least, he made in one!

Here sleeps arsonist "Torchie" Byers,
Who got his kicks from watching fires.
Now he's dead, he's having a ball
Watching the hottest fire of all.

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